

A SONATA  
FOR A  
NOBLE SOUL  
ALICE  
KIRKS

# **A Sonata for a Noble Soul**

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ALICE KIRKS

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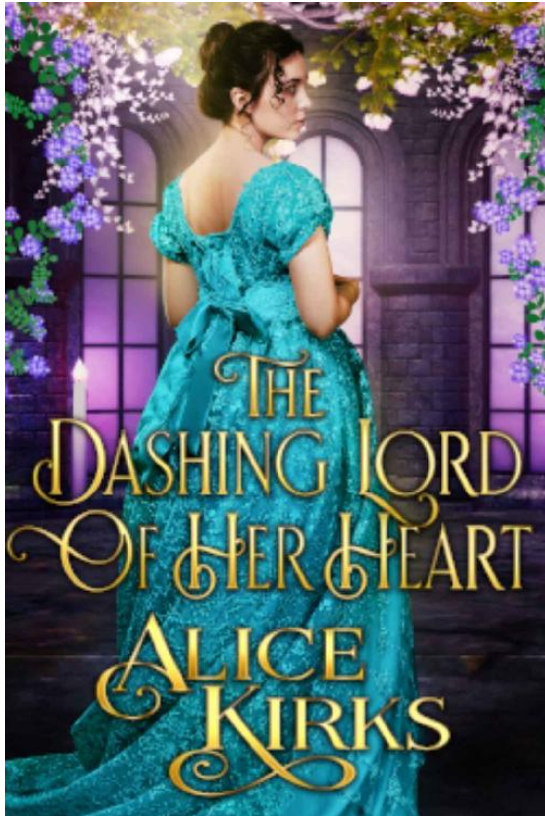
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# A Sonata for a Noble Soul



## Introduction

Lady Pippa Andrews believes that rather than searching for love, she should wait for love to find her. Her mother, however, insists on a marriage for financial reasons and she does whatever it takes to force her into courtships with wealthy lords. Pippa's heart only skips a beat though, when at a symposium, she meets a charming man, whose music sweeps her off her feet.

Will this charismatic man be able to give Pippa the fairytale life she has always dreamed of?

For Charlie Thomas, music has always been his life's passion. While he loves performing at balls, he wishes he could live the life his father led; one filled with adventurous travels and an everlasting romance. It is when he first lays eyes on the enchanting Lady Pippa that he begins to think such life is achievable after all. As time passes, Charlie realises that he is starting to fall for her mesmerising beauty...

Will Charlie find a way to get closer to the only woman who moved the strings of his heart?

While Pippa and Charlie fight for their chance at love, Pippa's mother insists on arranging a marriage of her own making, one that is acceptable to society. Despite all odds, will these two soulmates unite

their two worlds and follow the calling of true happiness? Or will they be doomed to a life of lovelessness caused by Pippa's mother?

## Chapter 1

“She looks so very happy,” said Lady Pippa Andrews, admiring her aunt and dearest friend, Elizabeth.

“Indeed, she does,” replied her father, the Duke of Bregman. “As am I. To be truthful, I never imagined she would finally marry. My little sister, finally choosing to let go of spinsterhood for the sake of love.”

Pippa smiled, glad that Elizabeth had managed to find a man worthy of her. At twenty-eight years of age, most people had thought she was doomed never to marry, but she had confided in Pippa many times that she believed the right gentleman was out there.

Thankful that her father had not forced his young sister to marry sooner, Pippa took his hand and squeezed it. The music played around them, and couples took to the floor to join Elizabeth and her intended.

“Father, will you dance with me?” Pippa asked.

“I can think of nothing that would make me happier,” he replied.

With that, the two made their way onto the floor and began dancing. It was a sweet moment for Pippa, twirling in her father’s arms. He had always been such a kind man and support for her. Although he did not wish for her to marry as late as her aunt did, she knew that he would do his best to aid her in finding a good man as opposed to a man she may not ever love.

“My dear, what do you think?” he asked, as though reading her mind.

“About what?”

“About the gentlemen you have met this evening. I am sure there is a good one amongst them. I am quite fond of Lord Browerton. He has done much work on behalf of the House of Lords. And Lord Croft as well. His business in the East Indies is rather astonishing,” he said.

Pippa sighed and smiled, not having been overly interested in either of those men. Although they were nice enough, she felt no spark with either of them and wondered if there was any chance that she might one day fall in love.

“For the time being, I do not expect that I will be courted by either of them. While they are decent gentlemen, I am not intrigued, Father,” she confessed.

“Very well,” he replied, disappointment weighing heavily in his voice.

Pippa didn’t want to let her father down, but she couldn’t lie, and she certainly would never subject herself to marrying a man purely for the sake of marriage. She longed to marry only for love, and if that day were going to come, she would need to fight for it. She would have no other choice than to stand firm and insist upon a future of her own making.

Unfortunately, however, Pippa knew that her mother was unlikely to

offer her the same graces her father did. As it was, her mother would never allow Pippa to carry on like this, waiting for the proper man to appear. It wasn't as though Pippa wished to be alone forever, but her mother's insistence was difficult and often left Pippa feeling discouraged.

"Has another gentleman caught your eye? Perhaps there is someone even here tonight whom you have not yet met. Shall I introduce you to anyone?" her father asked, hopeful.

"I am sorry, Father, but there is no one I have seen who I would like to know better. I overheard Mr. Williams speaking about all the land he owns, and it was clear that he is quite arrogant. And Elizabeth has told me that the Baron of Ryle is a bore," she explained.

"Just because your aunt thinks he is boring does not mean that you will as well," he warned.

"Father, Elizabeth and I have very much the same humour, and you know it. If she finds a gentleman to be full, I am bound to feel the same," Pippa reminded him, to which he relented as he spun her in the dance.

"Very well. Still, I should like for you to consider that there are many men here," he said.

"But I would like to wait for love, just as Elizabeth did. She always tells me that if you search for love, you will find it, but it may fade in time. If, however, you wait for love to find you, it is something you will never manage to escape," Pippa said.

Just as she and her father changed partners amid the dance, she saw a flash of mourning in his eyes. Perhaps it was the sadness for his own circumstance, being married to someone for whom he had no affection. Of course, Pippa's mother certainly did not love or respect him in return. Their marriage was merely an arrangement of convenience.

But soon they came back together, and he had a smile on his face once more.

"Well, my dear, that is a very important thing to consider. However, while I should like to give you the chance to find a man you can love, your mother may be less willing," he warned.

Pippa glanced over to her mother, who was standing with her friends, observing the dance with pursed lips and cold eyes. She was not a woman to be trifled with. Although Pippa was sure she had once been youthful and had the same joy as other young women, she was not like that now.

Moreover, people always told Pippa that she greatly resembled her mother, with those green eyes and the dark blonde hair that hung straight when it was not twisted into a neat bun. But Pippa saw these features as nothing more than a note of her genetics.

Her nature was nothing at all like her mother's, and that was something in which she took great pride.

"Surely she would understand that I at least want to have a life lived with joy and peace and a man whom I can truly adore," Pippa said.

Her father chuckled and gave a light shrug.

“My dear, your mother’s wishes have never ceased to confuse me. Nevertheless, I do hope that you maintain your optimism. Whether or not she gives you the freedom to remain unmarried much longer is something over which I have little control,” he said.

Pippa knew he was right. At least if she chose to marry sooner rather than later, she would have a small say in who the man might be. She would have to choose from amongst those men her mother and father picked for her, but if she continued to wait, her mother would likely decide on one specific man, whether Pippa liked him or not.

The dance came to an end with a long, lovely note that vibrated into the air. Pippa was at peace, having enjoyed every last moment of her dance with her father. He led her off to the edges of the dance floor and smiled.

“Those musicians really know what they are doing. I have seen a great many men perform with finesse and skill, but none with such passion,” he said.

“I was just thinking the very same thing,” Pippa replied, glancing over at the quartet in the corner of the brightly lit room. There was a violinist with a smile that exuded pure joy. He stood next to the cellist and violist, who were a good deal younger and resembled the violinist enough that Pippa assumed they were all brothers.

She could not see the fourth man, the pianist hidden by the sheet music, but he had played quite well in addition to the others. The men

each guzzled water in a hurry before quickly getting back to the task at hand and starting the next song.

“I shall remember them for the day in the near future when we are celebrating your engagement. If your mother has her way, it ought to be within the week, yes?” her father teased.

“Good heavens, I certainly hope not. I do not think I could bear it,” Pippa said.

“Pippa! Oh, Colin, you and your daughter dance as though you were made for it,” Elizabeth said, rushing over to Pippa and her father.

“Thank you, Lizzy. I am thrilled for you and your intended. I was so glad to see the two of you dancing as well,” Pippa’s father said.

“Elizabeth,” Pippa said, “Please tell my father—and my mother, for that matter—that it is far better to wait for love. Just as you have often told me.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and looked her brother in the eye.

“I fear that I have been telling your father this for many years. He always said that though I am his sister, I was too young to understand such matters. I trust he has learned his lesson by now,” Elizabeth said.

Although Pippa understood that Elizabeth was referring to the unhappiness between Pippa’s mother and father, the three remained



lighthearted. Her father simply cocked his head and sighed.

“Very well, I am not likely to win with the two of you beckoning me to give in to your wishes. I often find myself wishing that my sister and my daughter were not so close. It gives you such power to conspire against me,” he teased.

“That is not the power of your daughter and sister; it is simply the power of the female mind,” Elizabeth quipped.

Although Pippa wished that this moment truly could mean that a difference was upon the horizon, she knew better than that. It was silly to put any faith in the belief that her father would manage to convince her mother of anything her mother did not want. Still, Pippa hoped that a day might come when things would be different. She only had to trust that, in time, her voice would be heard.

## Chapter 2

Charles Thomas stretched his fingers across the keys to form the dissonant chord that concluded another song. At last, he exhaled, and the sweet, glorious tension of the melody broke. With a grin that he could not contain, he looked up at Joseph and his brothers, who lowered their bows and quickly made any tuning adjustments necessary.

“A waltz, Charlie?” Joseph asked.

“Yes, a waltz is next,” he replied, flipping the pages of his music. Charlie quickly reached for his water and took a deep drink, not having realised just how thirsty he was.

When he looked up over the pages for a moment, his eyes widened.

A young woman with straight, blonde hair that was pinned into the loveliest bun stood with a man who looked to be her father, as well as the soon-to-be bride that they were all celebrating. The blonde woman had enormous, light-coloured eyes.

Charlie could not tell if they were blue or green or a nice grayish hue, but they were large and round, giving her such an innocent appearance that he wondered for a moment if she were but a child trapped in the body of a woman.

Just then, another lady with similar colouring came over to the trio. There was an immediate tension amongst the others, but Charlie only

had a moment to observe what was happening. The woman—clearly the young lady's mother—grasped her by the wrist and excitedly urged her towards an older gentleman.

The young woman appeared displeased, but she went along as her mother quickly began making introductions to the fellow who was certainly not an appropriate age for a match.

The young lady smiled politely, and when the man leaned in with a leering smile and appeared to ask a question, his eyebrows raised with hope, the young woman stiffly relented.

“Is it all right if we take just a moment?” Joseph asked, leaning over to Charlie.

Charlie turned to him, trying to remember himself amid his distraction.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, of course. In fact, I do believe that it is time for a short break. They said we might have five minutes every hour,” Charlie said.

“Wonderful. Simon needs the privy,” Joseph said, glancing at his youngest brother.

Charlie gave Simon a nod to go, and the violist set down his instrument and rushed off in a hurry.

“He ought not to have so much water between each tune,” Charlie said with a laugh.

“No, indeed. I have often warned him about that, but he is still young and doesn’t always think about that,” Joseph replied.

Nathan was busily taking care of his instrument, and Charlie knew that he had a moment to ask his own question. He paused for a moment, knowing that it was ridiculous to even consider asking, but found that he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to know who that young woman was. If Joseph had any idea, at least it would satisfy Charlie’s curiosity, and that had to count for something.

“What exactly has you so distracted?” Joseph asked, stepping closer to Charlie and following his line of sight.

Charlie didn’t reply, but he continued to gaze upon the lovely young woman, and Joseph let out a gentle laugh.

“She’s lovely, is she not? There is certainly something about those eyes,” Joseph said.

“Whose eyes?” Simon asked, returning in a hurry.

“Lady—”

“Lads, what are you doing? Can you not see how the host is glaring at you?” Nathan asked in a harsh whisper, cutting Joseph off from

speaking.

Charlie looked up, saw the displeasure in Lord Daniel White's eyes, quickly sat back at the piano, and nodded to his friends that it was time to begin playing once more.

The four of them started to play the waltz, and Charlie, knowing it perfectly, peered around his sheet music and watched the young woman dance with the older gentleman. She showed exquisite elegance and grace, but there was no joy in her eyes any longer. She was clearly performing the dance out of duty rather than willingness.

Deciding that he had no desire to prolong her misery, Charlie spoke just loud enough for his friends to hear.

"Let us skip the second and third, lads. Go straight through fourth and fifth and be done with this one," he said, suggesting they keep the tune brief.

Joseph looked at him curiously but went along with it, and they played just over half the music, skipping the two repeats. As the waltz came to its end, there were a few confused expressions among those on the floor, but most people did not seem to notice.

Charlie was relieved to see the young woman escape the older gentleman in a hurry with a simple curtsy and departure back to the soon-to-be bride. With that, Charlie led them into another song.

They continued to play for nearly an hour when Lord White gave them a nod, and Charlie was glad that the evening was winding down.

They brought the last tune to a crescendo, and he struck his final note, completing the night once and for all.

“Well done, gentlemen,” Joseph said with a grin as he loosened the horsehair on his bow.

“Indeed, that was tremendous. We shall have no trouble at all finding parties to play in the future after an evening like this one,” Nathan said.

Charlie gathered his sheet music together and looked up once more to search the crowd for the young woman. He was desperate to know more about her, and Joseph had nearly told him before they’d had to start playing again. Although Joseph was busy getting his own things together, Charlie ushered him closer.

“You were going to tell me about the young woman, the one with the eyes,” he said.

“Hmm? What are you—oh! Yes! Of course,” Joseph said, realising what Charlie was speaking of once more.

“Who is she?”

“That young woman is Lady Pippa Andrews. Lady Elizabeth Andrews—the woman we were to celebrate this evening—is her aunt. Her father is Lord Colin Andrews, the Duke of Bregman,” Joseph replied.

Charlie's brows shot up in surprise. That young woman was the daughter of a duke? With that in mind, he was certainly a fool to have allowed himself even a moment of intrigue. A woman like that would never notice him, nor would she be allowed to.

"Ah, I see," he said with disappointment.

"Cheer up. Just because a woman of her esteem would never look twice at poor musicians like us does not mean that we must be sad. After all, we will certainly get to play in celebration of her future marriage as well," Joseph teased.

"Yes, that is precisely what I want. To have to play music for the engagement of the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and to know that I could never do anything more than that," Charlie muttered.

"Just remember that you played wonderfully, and even if she never knows your name, you allowed her to have a few decent dances for the night," Joseph said.

"Well, I do suppose that is something, after all," Charlie said, trying to stave off his disappointment.

In truth, Charlie was still desperately curious to know more about Lady Pippa. It didn't matter that she was a noblewoman or a stranger to him; it mattered only that he had seen her beauty as well as her unfortunate circumstance of having to entertain a man like the one she clearly wanted to get away from.

Perhaps it was a fool's hope to want to meet her, but a fool's hope was all a poor pianist could have. There was nothing else for him and no reason to imagine meeting her or speaking with her.

He loved his life, but this was the clincher he had to live with. Charlie would forever spend his days making music for the wealthy men and women of London, and he would never get the chance to dance amongst them.



## Chapter 3

Pippa was a mix of emotions as the night came to an end. Although part of her wanted to continue celebrating her aunt, another part of her felt relief. At least she would not have to spend another moment attempting to charm old men who were still unmarried and had a good deal of money to their names.

Pippa said goodbye to Elizabeth, and her father went to do the same. Just then, Pippa's mother drew near to her and leaned in close.

"Pippa, darling, you must go and speak with the earl," she demanded.

"Which earl, Mother?" Pippa asked, exhausted by the request.

"Lord Manning, of course. The man you waltzed with," her mother said.

"But why? He is nearly as old as Father. Surely you have no intention of making a match for me," Pippa replied.

Her mother narrowed her eyes, and Pippa took a deep breath, understanding that this was precisely what her mother intended.

"Very well," Pippa said, forlorn. "What exactly am I to say?"

“You are to thank him for the dance and wish him a pleasant journey home this evening,” her mother replied in frustration, as though Pippa should already know exactly what to do.

“As you wish, Mother,” she said.

With that, Pippa searched the room until she saw Lord Manning near the musicians.

“That’s a good girl, Pippa. Remember, it is very important that you find a man like him. He is wealthy, and that sort of money makes a woman extremely happy,” she insisted.

Pippa refrained from telling her mother that it certainly didn’t work in her own life. Pippa’s mother and father married for the mutual benefit of wealth and title, something which had brought no happiness to either of them within their marriage.

Nevertheless, she made her way towards Lord Manning, who was faced away from her. As she drew near, she quickly realised that he was scolding the musicians.

“I can hardly imagine why you would play such a short waltz. What exactly were you thinking? I needed it to last quite a bit longer than that, you understand,” he insisted.

“We beg your pardon. It was not our intention to cause you any distress this evening,” the violinist said, clearly unaccustomed to this treatment at the end of a night of performing.

“I fear that you caused me a great deal of distress,” Lord Manning replied. Then, with a rather suggestive laugh, he added, “I wanted more time with the young woman with whom I was dancing. Come now, you are musicians, and I am sure you know how it is with a woman. First, you must woo her in public. That is the only way to get more time with her ... in private.”

Pippa's blood ran cold, horrified as she understood what it was that Lord Manning was trying to say. It would have been bad enough if he had simply been crass, but saying it with that gruff laughter only made her even more humiliated as she realised he was speaking of her.

She saw the expressions on the musicians' faces, noting they looked more disgusted than anything. But when the violinist looked at her directly, his eyes widened. The pianist was red from anger, and then he, too, noticed that Pippa was standing there.

Just then, Lord Manning turned around and his own face drained of colour when he saw that she had clearly heard everything he said. His embarrassment was evident, but he quickly tried to cover it, regaining his posture and pasting a smile on his face as though nothing at all had happened.

“Ah, Lady Pippa. I had hoped I might find an opportunity to say farewell to you before the evening came to an end. So ... goodnight,” he said quickly before turning and leaving in a hurry.

For a long moment, Pippa stood frozen in place. She was in complete shock and didn't know what to say or do. She had never heard a man be so brazen about a woman before and could hardly believe that

someone would say that about her.

What did Lord Manning think of her? Did he truly believe that a longer dance with her meant that she would simply hand over her virtue without a second thought? Did he think that she was unwilling to hold her dignity to a higher standard?

Although she was dismayed by this response from Lord Manning, Pippa knew that she could not simply stand there forever, mourning the treatment she had received. When she managed to wake from the shock, she realised that the four musicians were still staring at her.

The pianist opened his mouth to speak, paused, and then proceeded to speak, although she saw how uncomfortable he was.

“I am terribly sorry that you had to endure such a shocking statement. Please know that his words have no effect on our assumption that you are a virtuous and noble woman,” he said, looking at her with great care and sympathy.

But despite the kindness in his words, Pippa couldn’t bear to stand there a moment longer. She turned away and bolted through the dwindling crowd.

Distraught by what had just happened, she could hardly bear to speak with anyone. Nevertheless, Pippa had to find her mother and father, push away her emotions, and follow them to the coach.

She was too upset to tell them what had happened but determined that she would try to find the words at a later time. Until then, all she

could do was vow never to marry a man like Lord Manning or his ilk.

No matter what her mother desired for her, this was not a life she could accept. She would not hand her happiness over to the whims of others, and she would never allow a man to disrespect her so brazenly.

As they made their way home by coach, Pippa remained quiet, lost to her distress and the realisation that for all her commitments to refuse such a life, she had to accept that she may have no choice in it at all.

## Chapter 4

Charlie eagerly turned the pages in his hand, scanning for any sign of the Duke of Bregman. While the society papers were not usually of interest to him, this was a unique circumstance. After all, this was his chance to learn something more about Lady Pippa and see if she might appear in the pages as well.

He could find nothing of her thus far. There was no scandal, which brought Charlie much relief. After all, he would have hated to find that the young lady who had intrigued him so much was among the sort of women who often had drama attached to their names.

Still, it was frustrating that he couldn't think of a way to learn more about her. Lady Pippa had struck him in a way that no other woman ever had. It was not simply because she was beautiful, and it was not even just the pure joy in her eyes when she spoke with her father. Rather, there was something about her innocence that had got to him, something that drew him towards her.

As Charlie continued to search closely, he finally discovered what he had been looking for. There it was, a bit of information about Lord Bregman, a man very important in the trade industry. It was advertised that he would be at a symposium in a few weeks for men who work in the trade of teas and spices.

Charlie smiled to himself. He felt deeply fortunate when he realised this was the very symposium where he had been hired to perform with the quartet.

Along with Joseph, Simon, and Nathan, Charlie was meant to play in

one of the rooms. They would simply be off in the corner while families made their way through the hall and tried teas and spices from far-off lands and distant places.

There were supposed to be many rooms, and he would simply be in one part, but that was enough for him. It meant that he would have an opportunity to search for Lord Bregman and learn a little bit more about him.

It was foolish, eagerly trying to discover information about that man and his family just because of his daughter. She was someone Charlie would never have occasion to speak with. Nevertheless, he could not help himself. It was far too tempting to think that he might have the chance to get to know her. After all, why not? Why shouldn't he try at the very least?

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The mood was frantic as men and women of all sorts mingled about, laughing and sharing tales, learning about new flavours and delights. Charlie and the others played as loudly as they could, but he knew that nobody was listening to them. The music could not be heard over the din of noise.

He wasn't bothered, however. At least he had been able to come to the event and would have a chance to meander through the tables during his break. He would smell the spices and taste the teas. Already the room had a smoky-sweet aroma wafting throughout. And in another room he had passed through, the spice was enough to choke him.

In addition to their own music, Charlie heard the melody of a dozen languages intermingling as the people walked by. Their features were

an exhilarating change from the humdrum of British dullness. He was thrilled to see such variation in the people.

Charlie trilled his way up the keys. There was only one more song before he would have a nice break. When he looked up, he saw Lord Bregman and his family walking together, looking at the trinkets on the tables that were interspersed with the spices and teas.

Lady Pippa and her aunt were busy, stalled at one of the tables. She looked every bit as lovely as she had two weeks before when he had seen her last. As soon as Charlie finished the song, he looked at Joseph and smiled quickly.

“I need to take a rest for a moment, but I shall be back soon,” he said. Before Joseph and his brothers could say a word, Charlie had rushed off and made his way towards the table where the ladies still stood.

Whoever was meant to be watching the table had apparently gone for a moment, probably needing the loo or a rest. This was ideal for Charlie as he reached the two women just as Lady Pippa held a music box in her hands.

“Oh, what is this?” she asked.

“Pardon me, My Lady, but that is a music box,” Charlie explained, stepping a little bit closer. For a moment, Lady Pippa squinted as if she recognised him, but it seemed that she could not place it and moved on.

“A music box?” she asked.



“Yes, indeed. If you open that hatch, I expect you will find the key making the melody,” he told her.

Lady Pippa looked at her aunt, and they smiled with the mischief of it just before she opened the box and gently touched the winder.

“Are you the gentleman who brought these here?” she asked him, hesitating before she decided to play the music.

“No, no. I fear not,” he said with a laugh. “I wish I could travel and experience the tastes of all that is represented here, but I have never done so. No, I simply love music boxes.”

“But shall I be in trouble if I decide to play it?” she asked.

“That is doubtful. Whoever is meant to be standing here is gone, is he not? He would not depart without understanding that there are a great many men and women here who would be interested in the trinkets he has on display,” Charlie reasoned.

This seemed to be enough for Lady Pippa and her aunt. At last, she turned the winder and allowed the song to play a melody that was unlike any she might hear at a ball.

“Good heavens, what is this?” her aunt asked with intrigue. “Such a strange little tune.”

“It sounds as though it is from the Far East. I have heard many songs like this before. And do you see this here?” he asked, picking up an erhu.

“I have never seen an instrument like that. What is it?” Lady Pippa asked.

“This is an erhu, a kind of fiddle. I wish I could describe to you the sound that it makes when it is well played. However, I have only heard it perhaps four times. It is a mournful instrument, as far as I am concerned, but one that I should like to hear whenever I am able,” he confessed, swooning over the strikingly beautiful instrument.

“And how do you know so much about it? I have never seen such a thing before,” Lady Pippa remarked.

Charlie looked down and blinked away the memories. He set the stunning instrument back on the table, realising that it brought him pain to think of it.

“My father ...” he began, finding the strength to speak of the man he so admired. “My father was a musician. He had the opportunity to travel often, and he had a great many instruments as well as friends who played them. They were an eclectic group of men who had either hailed from different kingdoms or had spent enough time to learn the sounds of those empires.”

Lady Pippa looked at him with compassion, her head tilted slightly and her vibrant eyes soft with understanding. For a moment, Charlie couldn't tell if he wanted her to remember him or if it was easier this

way. At least, now she didn't see him as simply the man who had played music for her aunt.

Lady Andrews glanced between the two of them and smiled, but Charlie noticed it right away and felt his stomach do a flip. He had been caught in his clear interest. Certainly, he hoped that Lady Pippa had not noticed it.

"That is very interesting," Lady Pippa said, moving the conversation along. "Have you ever had an opportunity to learn any of those instruments?"

"My father left me a sitar when he passed away. He had sold many of his other instruments as he was unable to play music as he aged. His hands grew gnarled from the efforts of many years and age finally took him, but at least he had the sitar remaining," Charlie said, sighing peacefully.

"I have never seen a sitar. What is that?" Lady Pippa asked.

Charlie looked around the room, scanning with squinted eyes. He hoped he might see one among the other tables, and, at last, he did. It was being played by a gentleman in the opposite corner of the hall and could not be heard over all the noise.

"You see that man over there? It is the instrument he is playing. Perhaps, if you are able, you will go closer and have the opportunity to hear him. I strongly urge you to do so, and I am sure that you shall not regret it," he said.

“Very well,” she promised with a nod. “I shall make my way over as soon as I am able. Come, Elizabeth, we must go and listen.”

“I think your father wants us to find him and your mother first. Once we have had the chance to tell him that we want to hear it, I am certain he will allow us,” Lady Andrews said.

Lady Pippa was evidently disappointed, but she was not pouting, much to Charlie’s relief. He had never found that trait attractive in a woman, and at least Lady Pippa didn’t seem to be the kind of woman who would behave so childishly.

“Very well, but I do wish to go and listen once we are able. Do you think Father will let us? I know that he wants us to stay close and represent him as a family, but I want nothing more than to wander and explore,” Lady Pippa said to her aunt.

“We shall just have to see. I trust that he will be patient with us, but we ought to follow him for now,” her aunt said.

With that, they turned back to Charlie and curtsayed.

“Thank you again for your wonderful tales. I do hope that one day I may learn more about instruments like these and the lovely music boxes,” Lady Pippa said.

“Perhaps the gentleman selling them will return soon enough, and you may ask him everything you wish to know,” Charlie said with a grin. He didn’t want Lady Pippa to leave but knew there was little hope of convincing her to remain. At least she could enjoy the rest of her day,

and he would have the chance to watch her now and then, observing whatever he could.

Charlie was still surprised by her. She was bright and sweet, certainly intelligent as far as he could tell. She was not the spoilt sort of girl he might have feared her to be, but rather a gentle and calming presence to be near.

He found that he was more interested than ever. Although it would only get him into trouble, he was starting to question if there would ever be a day in which he might have the chance to be near a woman like her and not have to fear that her family might come and chase him away.

Still, Charlie wanted to be wise. It would not be a clever thing to try and speak to her again that day, else she might find him somewhat ... overly familiar. But if he had the chance to give her a surprise now and again? If they happened to bump into one another sometime soon?

Surely she could not be too upset about that, could she? After all, London was a large city, but it was still only a small part of the Earth, and there had never been another woman Charlie was more interested in running into.

## Chapter 5

Pippa could not stop thinking about the handsome man she had met at the symposium that day. His handsome features, with those bright blue eyes and the brown hair that fell lazily in curls around his head. He was both trim and broad, with a masculine form that would make any woman swoon.

She had never been the sort of lady who judged a man by his appearance, but he had certainly been striking. There was something very familiar about him, and she was certain that she had seen him before but could not quite place it. She felt the strangest urge to thank him or to be embarrassed, and she couldn't quite figure out why either of those responses would have made sense.

Whatever it was, she couldn't get him out of her thoughts. There was something about the way he spoke so lovingly when he told her about the instruments and his father. There was something in his eyes that sparkled when he shared about the music box and explained the tune that was so strange to her.

She wanted to know more about that man and regretted not introducing herself properly to him. If she had done so, perhaps she would not feel so foolish now, caught away from him and without any other way of speaking to him.

Elizabeth had teased her afterwards, saying that she ought not to go and fall in love with the first handsome man to cross her path, but Pippa didn't let Elizabeth know just how much Pippa had thought of him. It was one thing to be teased, but it was quite another to be taken seriously.

“Pippa!” came the call from down the hall.

Pippa groaned, knowing that her mother only used that tone when there was something urgent—usually something that Pippa wouldn’t want to face.

Nevertheless, she stood from the oak vanity in her room and made her way out to the hall. Her mother was rushing towards her with a slip of paper and shoved it in Pippa’s face.

“What is it, Mother?” she asked.

“Lord Manning. He has agreed to come to dinner this evening! Oh, he never replied, and I thought that he must not wish to join us. I feel like such a fool as I did not urge the maids to prepare anything special. Now, however, I must come up with something quick. You, my dear, need to put on your finest dress. Perhaps the burgundy? It is such a rich colour,” her mother said, rushing through her words in such a hurry that the entire thing ran together.

Pippa grimaced, disgusted by the realisation she would have to spend her evening with that man. How could her mother do this to her? It was true that Pippa had never found the right moment to tell her mother and father what Lord Manning had done, but still. Did they think she ought to be wooed by a man that old? Why would they agree to put her through this?

“Did you hear me?” her mother squawked.

“I heard you, Mother, but I cannot understand why it is of such importance. That man is grotesque. He is dreadful and crass, and he said things ... things about me ...”

Pippa trailed off, and her mother rolled her eyes.

“Dear, I am sure he said nothing that could not be explained away. You must understand that a man of his station must be endured no matter the cost. He is wealthy and noble and has all the attributes a young woman such as yourself must desire in the world,” her mother said.

“There is nothing desirable about him. He is awful. Why would you think that he is someone I must consider, Mother? He is an old man, and I would be loathed to have to give him my affection,” Pippa said.

“If not affection, you must at least give him your attention,” her mother ordered through gritted teeth.

Pippa understood that she had no choice. Her mother sent the maid to help Pippa dress in her finery, pin up her hair, and choose delicate yet striking jewellery. By the time Lord Manning arrived, Pippa knew she looked her best, but this was not the man she wanted to look her best for.

She made her way down the stairs and joined her mother and father with Lord Manning in the parlour. With a curtsy and a false smile, she prepared herself for the evening ahead.

“Ah, there is that lovely daughter of yours,” Lord Manning said, his



eyes scouring into Pippa in such a way that she immediately got chills.

“Good evening, Lord Manning,” she said.

“Good evening, My Lady. And how are you this evening?”

Pippa engaged in his proper greetings, and they exchanged meaningless chatter about the weather as they all sat together before the maid came to tell them that dinner was now ready.

Once they were seated in the dining hall, Lord Manning launched into stories of his life, things he believed would be *impressive to a young lady*, as he put it. As it happened, Pippa found him to be merely dull and arrogant.

“Well, you might not be surprised to learn that the admiral had been drinking far too much rum that evening,” Lord Manning said, continuing one of his lengthy stories.

“No, indeed. Admiral Chalmers has always been known for his drink,” Pippa’s father said, chuckling along even though it was clear that he, too, was bored.

“So, as he was too far gone to be aware in his steering of the ship and the first mate had abandoned his post for sheer cowardice, there was no one to step in but myself,” Lord Manning said.

“But you said that you had no experience at sea prior to this,” Pippa’s

mother noted, her voice breathy and delicate in the way it always was when she was trying to impress someone.

“No, indeed, I did not. But a man such as myself can cast aside his fears and uncertainties. He can push through the fog until he knows that he might bring justice on behalf of the Kingdom of England. This is our land, and I would not see it betrayed for drink and terror,” he said in a fiercely noble manner that reeked of pride.

“You are truly a man of noble virtue,” Pippa’s mother said.

Lord Manning smiled with false humility and gave a simple shrug.

“Well, I do appreciate that, Lady Bregman, but I have not yet told you of how I brought the ship into port on my own, with nary a fellow sailor to aid me,” he said, finding a way to add in the part which made him the proudest.

Pippa wondered if this story had any truth to it or if Lord Manning was speaking entirely based on his attempts to impress her. Whatever it was, she found herself bored as ever, wondering if there was any chance of escape without her mother chasing after her and forcing her to return and attempt to swoon over this old man.

The evening continued, and Pippa made very little effort to speak or pretend to be impressed. She found that her quiet was barely even noticed. Lord Manning was far more interested in getting to know Pippa’s father and preening under the false expressions of delight exhibited by her mother.

After the meal was finished, they returned to the parlour for tea and brandy before Lord Manning finally acknowledged that it was time for him to depart.

“Oh, dear, I wish the time had not gone by so quickly. I should have liked to remain here a little bit longer and continue getting to know this wonderful family. I do think that we must meet again soon,” he said.

Pippa was relieved once the door was closed and he was gone. Her mother went on and on about how impressive Lord Manning was, while Pippa’s father remarked that he was not the sort of man he would ever choose for his daughter.

But while her own mother and father debated the matter, Pippa hurriedly escaped and made her way up to her room. She ran inside and closed the door behind herself, leaning against it and taking a deep breath, exhaling slowly with her eyes closed.

When she opened her eyes again, she looked directly across the room to the window. Much to her shock, she saw that it was open, just enough that something had been tucked into the crack.

Pippa’s heart began to race, and she was terribly frightened, realising that someone had come to her window to put this here. Had it been a maid? Had someone put something in the window from the inside? Or had someone climbed the trellis to her balcony? Was it possible that a stranger might even be there at that moment, waiting for her?

Pippa crept over to the window, taking care to watch for any sort of movement. Although the window was open slightly, the door was shut securely and wedged in place as it always was. Once she reached the

window, she scanned the balcony and found it mercifully empty.

The only thing left to do was take the papers from the crack. She was frightened to do this, not knowing who it could possibly have been who left them. Still, curiosity got the better of her, and Pippa pulled the papers free.

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Half the day had flown by, and Pippa barely noticed as she sat at the piano, practicing the mysterious musical score that had appeared in her room. She played when the maids passed by, and she eyed them, watching for any sign that they had left the tune there for her. But there was no recognition, nothing to make her think they had been responsible for this.

She couldn't help wondering who it had been, but there were no answers to be had. Someone strange and mysterious had done this. Someone had decided to leave her a little treat, and Pippa couldn't imagine why.

There was no note with the music, and it was insanity to think someone had climbed up the trellis for this, but that was the only explanation.

When Elizabeth came over to see her in the afternoon, Pippa was still practicing the slow, melodic tune that denoted a strange longing. She could not explain it, but there was something about the combination of notes that left her mourning for a life she had never lived, yearning for something she'd never had.

“That is beautiful,” Elizabeth said, sitting beside her on the piano bench.

“Yes, it is. I have never played a piece quite like it,” she said.

“Who is the composer?”

Pippa paused for a moment, not knowing what to say. She couldn’t tell Elizabeth where the music had come from. Elizabeth would tell Pippa’s mother and father, and then the music would surely be taken away, and she would be put under watch at every moment for her safety’s sake.

“I found it among my sheet music, but there is no note as to the author of the music. I wish I knew,” she said.

“Hmm. That is interesting. Anyway, I do like it,” Elizabeth said. “Oh, your mother mentioned that Lord Manning was here. Is that old fool really trying to court you?”

Pippa stopped playing and turned to Elizabeth with a heavy heart.

“Unfortunately, it would appear so. And my mother, of course, has not made any effort to dissuade him. I think she would be thrilled by my marriage to a man so rich as he,” Pippa confessed.

“Does she not know that he is roughly Colin’s age?” Elizabeth scoffed,

mentioning Pippa's father.

"One would expect her to consider this as a reason to avoid a union with me, but it seems that my mother and Lord Manning are both unbothered. I fear that they think I am just as likely to marry old as I am to marry young," Pippa said.

"I am so terribly sorry, my dear Pippa. I know how much you wish to have the freedom to fall in love," Elizabeth said.

"I truly do. I wish that someone would stop for a moment and ask me what would make me happy. But all they wish for is my marriage to a man who will bring good fortune to us. And in my mother's mind, Lord Manning is just the right person for the job," Pippa groaned.

"Perhaps I may speak with her. I do not care for the man, and he only came to our party because my betrothed has done business with him in the past. We both agree that he is the most arrogant bore we have ever known," Elizabeth said.

"Indeed, he is. I am glad that you can agree. However, I do not think my mother will care how anyone feels about him. She only wants to ensure that I marry a wealthy man," Pippa said.

"Have you not told her what you overheard Lord Manning say? Perhaps she will change her mind if she knows what a terrible thing he suggested," Elizabeth said.

"Perhaps," Pippa replied with a doubtful sigh.

When it came to her mother, Pippa had very little to hope for. She knew there were few chances that she would ever be given the chance to choose a husband of her own, even if she thought about it constantly. And if Lord Manning was going to continue coming around like this, what more was she to do but hope that he would grow bored of her?

There had to be something, some way to show her mother what a dreadful choice he was. No matter what, Pippa was going to stand firm that she would not marry a man like him.

## Chapter 6

Charlie and Joseph wandered the town to get to the music shop. Joseph needed his bow to be re-haired, and Charlie had gone along with him to see about a new tuning key to have on hand when they performed in other places where the piano might need a bit of help. He was terrible about losing the tuning keys, and it was a constant problem.

“I believe it was the reel at the country dance that did it,” Joseph groaned, still frustrated that he needed the horsehair replaced on the bow. It was expensive for men of their means to have to do such upkeep all the time.

“Perhaps if you had not played so vigorously, you would not have this problem,” Charlie replied.

“If I did not play with passion, we would not get hired half so often. We are playing at least three evenings per week, whether at country halls or noble balls. I think that is a grand accomplishment for men like us,” Joseph insisted.

He was certainly right, and Charlie couldn’t deny that. They really had made a good deal of progress in playing at events where they would never have imagined performing even just a few years before. It seemed that doors were opening for them at every turn now, and that was an unexpected shift.

Charlie had been distracted the last few days, however. Although they had to prepare for their next event, his thoughts continued to drift back to Lady Pippa and wondering how she had responded when she



found the music. Was she shocked? Angry? Frightened?

Or had she played the music and enjoyed it? Had she thought the piece beautiful, or was the influence too foreign? Charlie couldn't stop thinking about it, even as he and Joseph nearly ran straight into a group of wealthy bankers who looked down on them with disgust as the musicians passed between the group of men.

"Charlie, are you listening to me?" Joseph asked.

"Hmm?"

"I was asking if you wanted to add anything new to our rotation of songs. At times I feel that we would be better off adding more to the list to maintain the excitement. You know, once we play the same tune a thousand times over, it does grow more difficult to show our eagerness," Joseph said.

"Oh, yes. Well ... if there is a song you wish us to include, simply tell me, and we may think where it would belong," Charlie said.

Joseph was quiet, but Charlie could feel his friend side-eyeing him as they walked. Joseph was obviously suspicious about something. At last, Charlie glanced at him and dared to ask.

"What is it? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Something is strange about you today. Something is different. Not

just today, actually. The past few days. You have seemed as though you are not hearing me at all times. Has something happened? Are you hiding something?" Joseph asked.

"What? Me? Of course not!" Charlie insisted.

"Then what is it? Why do you always seem to be thinking of other things? Are you planning to leave myself and my brothers? Do you intend to join new musicians?" Joseph asked, his voice rife with panic.

But Charlie laughed and shook his head.

"Never, Joseph. I could not play music with any men but the three of you. We know one another far too well for me to waste time learning to perform with others. As it happens, my mind is on something quite different, and I have not wanted to speak about it for fear that you will think me mad ... or that you will simply be angry with me," Charlie admitted.

"And why would I be angry with you? What have you done? Are you the reason I must go and have my bow fixed? Did you cut the hairs or pull them out one at a time between our performances?" Joseph mocked.

"No, I wish it were something so small and foolish. As it is, what I have done is something that might infuriate you beyond reckoning," Charlie said.

"Oh dear, I have a dreadful feeling that I would rather you not tell me," Joseph said.

“Then I shall not tell you,” Charlie replied.

“No! I was only saying that because it was the proper response. Clearly, you must tell me what it is that you have done so dreadfully. Please, explain yourself,” Joseph urged.

“Very well. I must confess to you that I have found my heart longing to know Lady Pippa Andrews. I am sure that you could tell as much when we played at her aunt’s engagement party,” Charlie said.

“Yes, it was quite clear,” Joseph agreed.

“Well, I saw her once more at the symposium, and I realised that she is truly the loveliest woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. I think I would be absolutely thrilled to know someone like her better,” he said.

“What of it?”

“I ... oh goodness, you are going to think I have lost my mind altogether,” Charlie said.

“Then tell me and get it over with. If I think you mad regardless, you have nothing to hide,” Joseph reasoned.

“I wrote a piece of music for Lady Pippa. And ... because I wished her to hear it, I climbed the trellis outside her room and stuck the music into the crack of her window,” he confessed, quickening his pace as if to escape Joseph’s reaction.

As it was, Joseph did not speak, and Charlie soon realised that he had left his friend behind. Joseph was in such shock he had stopped then and there along the sidewalk rather than continuing with Charlie.

Still, Charlie did not turn back. Instead, he continued until, at last, Joseph was motivated to rush and try to catch up to him.

“You did *what*?” he asked, clearly astonished by this action.

“Yes, I know that you must think me a madman, but you have absolutely no idea what this woman means to me. She is not aware that it was I who left the music. When I saw her at the symposium, she did not recognise me, and I did not remind her of the party. So she will have no way of knowing that I am a musician,” he said.

“How could you do something so dangerous and daring? Are you not aware that you have put yourself at great risk? What if she figures out it was you? What if you had been seen? Did you really think you could get away with this?” Joseph asked, utterly shocked.

“I know that it is not the sort of thing that a man like myself ought to do, but you cannot imagine what it was like, writing this piece for her and not being allowed to play it for her? At least she may now play it for herself at the pianoforte. And while she may not be aware that I wrote it specifically for her, I hope that it conveys everything I wish,” he said.

“But you might as well have thrown yourself before her father and said that you came to sweep his daughter away and marry her. She is a noblewoman, Charlie,” Joseph scolded.

“Yes, I know that, but what of it? My father wooed my mother by writing music for her and sneaking it to her home. It is a romantic gesture and not one that I take lightly. It may seem like a strange thing to you, but I know that I had to do it. I find myself drawn to her inexplicably,” he said.

“Ha! You find her beautiful, and you cannot control your gaze. That is all there is to this. You may like to look at her, but that is hardly the same as wooing her. You must know that this is unwise, Charlie. I should hate you to get into trouble for something like this,” Joseph said.

“There is no reason for me to get into trouble,” Charlie replied, denying even to himself that Joseph was absolutely correct. He was doing something that would be detrimental to his work if caught in pursuit of a nobleman’s daughter. And although he wanted to think he was merely following in his father’s footsteps, he had to admit that his mother and father were of the same class. There was nothing scandalous about their interest in one another, and it would never create any sort of discord.

Charlie wondered if there was a way he could approach Lady Pippa directly but knew it was impossible. So what was he to do? Did he have to put aside his interest? Or could he find a way to convince her that she ought to give him a chance regardless of his station in society?

When his mother had passed away, Charlie was just a child. His father

had told him all about her, how he wooed her through his music and how happy they were when they married and decided to spend their lives together.

It always brought Charlie such joy to hear about it, to learn of the love between his mother and father and how much they cared for one another. It was miraculous to think that two people could feel so much for one another and that they would be able to live a life full of care and affection unlike anything else Charlie had ever seen or heard of.

But just because his own mother and father had felt that for one another didn't mean Charlie would ever find such a wife or a marriage. In truth, he had to accept the difficult reality that some people were just never meant to find love.

## Chapter 7

Pippa followed her mother throughout town as they searched for a decent pair of shoes that Pippa might wear to the next ball. For many years they had gone to the same cobbler, but after her mother was unsatisfied with his work the last time, she insisted they find another place to have shoes made.

“I do not need a new pair, Mother. I am more than happy with the ones I have,” Pippa said, knowing she already had plenty of shoes to choose from compared to the other young women she knew.

“But you need some that are new and different, a pair that will truly make you stand out,” her mother declared.

This made little sense to Pippa, given that her dress would mostly hide the shoes anyway.

“Besides, you need a finer heel. I never was pleased with the unevenness of those we had Mr Hall make for you, but the last time was the final straw. Now, we have the opportunity to find shoes from someone who can truly make a pair that stands out,” her mother continued.

“Very well,” Pippa said, relenting to the fact that she could not stop her mother once she had started.

In the previous few days, Pippa had told her mother and father about the incident with Lord Manning on the evening of Elizabeth’s party.

Her mother had not readily believed her, but Pippa's father was furious and demanded they cease all attempts at courtship. This was such a great relief to Pippa that she thought she would cry, but when she saw her mother's frustration, Pippa knew it would only cause her mother to be even more demanding.

Now, she was bound and determined to find a man for Pippa who would be better than any other, someone with all the grace and elegance afforded a man. It seemed a difficult task to Pippa, given how little she thought of most noblemen, but there was nothing she could do about it.

"I need you to ensure that you are more than presentable at the Willingham Ball. I trust you know that this is one of the finest events of the season, and only the best of men will be there," her mother said.

"Yes, Mother, I know," Pippa said.

"Many of your father's friends shall come. Some of them are still unmarried, and others have sons who are of marrying age. I am certain you will find a gentleman there," she said.

"I cannot marry a man who is father's age. I will not," Pippa said, hoping her mother would take it to heart. After dealing with Lord Manning, Pippa couldn't bring herself to suffering at the desires of another elderly gentleman.

"Oh, do hush. I wish I had been able to marry a man of a decent age rather than someone who knew so little about taking care of women. As it is, I married someone youthful and idealistic without an ounce of true manhood," her mother remarked snidely.



Pippa stopped in her tracks, angered by her mother's callous words. While Pippa was far closer to her father than she was to her mother anyway, this was still such a dreadful thing to say, and she could not believe that her mother would be so cold.

It appeared that her mother recognised the error as well, and she looked down in shame for a moment.

"Forgive me, Pippa," she said, a phrase that Pippa had never before heard spoken by her mother. "I married your father because my own mother and father arranged it and insisted upon it. It was never my choice. However, they chose him because they knew he was the best man to provide for me, and in time, I grew to care for him to an extent. I am sure, likewise, that you will grow to care for the man we choose for you to marry."

"But, Mother, I do not want you to choose a husband for me. Particularly if it means that I will be as unhappy as you and Father are," Pippa said.

"We are only unhappy because of the decision that was made for us when we did not want it. I expect that, in time, things might come to improve. For now, however, I want you only to think about finding a husband who can give you everything you need in society. A man who can buy you shoes, for instance, is one who can keep you respectable in the eyes of your friends," she said.

Pippa's dearest friend was Elizabeth, who would never insist upon a nice pair of shoes. But Pippa understood that this was not a battle she would ever win and trying to reason with her mother was madness.

“Oh! Do you see these lovely pieces?” her mother asked, trailing off towards the jewellery shop. She stood outside, looking in through the window at the gems on display. Pippa glanced for a moment, taking in the sight of a nice, simple set of pearls.

The owner came out the front door and greeted Pippa’s mother with excitement in his eyes.

“Ah, hello, My Lady. You look as though you could do with something truly fine around your neck. Perhaps you would like to come inside and take a closer look?” he asked.

As Pippa’s mother insisted on knowing some of his pricing before entering the shop, Pippa glanced across the way, seeing the music shop. She sighed, thinking back to the gentleman with the music box. Wondering if this shop might have an erhu or music boxes or a sitar, she couldn’t stop eyeing it.

She had been playing the pianoforte since she was a young girl, but the idea of learning other instruments was intriguing. Elizabeth played the harp, but Pippa had scarcely done more than learn a few simple pieces. She found piano keys far more forgiving than those thin strings with small gaps between them.

“Oh!” Pippa gasped as someone bumped her hard.

“Forgive me! I was not looking,” he said.

Pippa looked up and saw a pair of lovely blue eyes looking at her in shock. He very quickly started to blush.

He was none other than the man who had spoken to her and Elizabeth about the music boxes at the symposium.

There was another man with him, someone who looked familiar as well, and once more, Pippa knew that she had seen them somewhere before. Nevertheless, she could not place them no matter how much she racked her brain.

“I beg your pardon,” Pippa said.

“No, please. The fault is all mine. I was not looking,” he said, glancing at his friend. There was a strange look between them, as though they had been caught somehow or that they were guilty of something. Pippa wasn’t sure what might have passed in that glance, but she did know that she could not be happier about seeing this man now.

“I ... I just noticed the music shop along the way and was wondering if they might have any music boxes,” she said, hoping he remembered their previous conversation. The brightness in his eyes told her that he did.

“Sadly, they do not. Merely instruments. But if you should like to see music boxes, there are a few shops on the east side of the city. Unfortunately, they are not in the areas that a woman of your station is likely to wander,” he noted.

“I may try to convince my mother to allow me to go,” Pippa said. Her

heart was racing as she spoke with him. His friend gave them plenty of space to discuss the matter, but Pippa hardly minded his presence. It gave her some small comfort to see that this man had a close friend, someone who looked quite respectable.

“Yes, you must,” the man said. “And how is your friend?”

“My friend?”

“Yes, the young woman you were with when I met you at the symposium. It seemed that the two of you are quite close,” he said.

Pippa found herself wondering if it had actually been Elizabeth who interested him more than Pippa did, but she pushed away any jealousy and smiled, more than happy to talk about Elizabeth.

“She is doing very well, thank you,” Pippa said.

“Good, I am glad to hear that. I could see that she thought very well of you. And I can understand why. You are clearly a woman of deep thought and many interests,” he said.

Pippa blushed, understanding that he was trying to compliment her while remaining appropriate. It was wonderful to receive these words from him, and she couldn't help feeling humbled.

“I do try. However, I must confess that life for young women more often consists of trying on shoes as I am to do today,” she said with an

anxious laugh.

“Ah, yes. Shoes are very important,” he said, laughing in reply.

Their simple words held a much deeper meaning, and Pippa was certain he felt it too. They were speaking of nothing important, and yet they were each trying to show a little bit of themselves to the other. It was silly, but Pippa felt strangely comfortable with him, even there on the busy sidewalk.

“Pippa,” her mother said, grasping her arm in a hurry. She turned to her mother in surprise, and it was clear that her mother had been so busy with the jeweller that she had only just realised Pippa was speaking with two strange men along the side of the road.

The men looked somewhat jarred, but they each gave a bow and departed. Pippa didn't want them to go, but she sensed that the handsome man didn't want to leave either. It was his friend who pulled him along.

“Come, we must go inside. He said he has a large ruby piece that I want to see. And what are you doing, speaking with strange men like that? You know better,” her mother said, adding the scold at the end of her statement as she was so excited by the jewellery she could think of little else.

Pippa followed her mother inside, but she continued to watch out the front window as the two men made their way to the music shop and darted inside. She saw the handsome man look back at the jewellery store just once before his friend closed the door.

Her heart sank. Once more, she failed to find out his name or anything more about him. How was it that she had now met him twice and still knew nothing? It didn't seem fair. All she wanted now was another chance to speak with him, even if it was just long enough to find out his name and how she might meet him once more.

He was so interesting. And gentlemanly. Although he was clearly not a nobleman, he had the elegance and propriety of someone who had been raised very well and knew how to behave in all settings.

Pippa thought she had never met someone with such grace before, and this man was the only one she could ever truly want to know better. Of all those men her mother tried to choose for her, this was the one she was struck by. This was the man who made her heart beat quickly.

Who was he? And what would it take to convince her mother that she did not need to marry a nobleman when there were men like him in the world? Was wealth really so important if a woman did not love the man she chose? Surely a mutual affection and admiration meant more than money in every way, and it could only be a matter of time before she had to prove it?

## Chapter 8

The dark of night had fallen, but it was still a risk. Charlie understood how dangerous this was, how bad the consequences would be if he were caught. He knew that he was in grave jeopardy and that the only way out of this was to succeed in stealth. If he failed, the constable would be called. He would face dire consequences.

But that was a risk Charlie was willing to take. He believed that love was worth it. Perhaps that was foolish. He didn't even know if this really was love. But did it matter? He needed to do whatever was necessary to find out if his heart belonged to this woman and if hers would ever belong to him.

He had observed the staff and accounted for anyone who might be outside. The groom had finished his duties and had made his way to his quarters, a drink in hand. There was no one to catch him now.

Making his way along the trees until he reached the western wall of the estate, Charlie finally came forward and hurried to the wall. He grasped hold of the trellis and climbed up with ease, his limbs nimble and quick. It took only a few moments before he reached the balcony, and once there, Charlie paused again and observed his surroundings.

He knew that it would take only a moment, only one small mistake. That would be enough for him to be discovered and all of this to fall apart.

But there was no light in the room, and he was confident that Lady Pippa must still be down with her mother and father. They were probably just having tea after dinner or some such activity. More than

likely, she would come up soon and prepare for bed, but he still had time before she came up.

Charlie gently pried the window with a firm grip, opening it just enough to tuck the papers in the gap and then let the window close enough to trap them. It was not a perfect plan, but it was still the best he could come up with. After all, this was daring enough. He could never invade her room or cross a line further than the one he was already crossing.

Content that the musical score was secure, Charlie readied to go back down the trellis. He threw one leg over the edge of the balcony and took hold of the trellis with a hand. But just as he was ready to pull himself over, Charlie heard the sound of voices from below.

In a panic, he pulled himself back onto the balcony, knowing he was trapped. He wasn't sure what to do, realising that he had nowhere to go and that if discovered, his worst nightmare would come to pass.

Charlie let out a long, slow breath, trying not to give in to the fear. A voice in the back of his mind mocked him, telling him that he had been such a fool, that he knew better, that this was the act of a madman stalking a woman. There were so many reasons he should not have come and that he ought to be ashamed of his decision.

But there was still that surge of romanticism as well that told him he'd had no choice, and he was doing all this for the sake of wonder and care for a woman he was intrigued by. Was it madness? Perhaps. But was it precisely how his father had wooed his mother? Indeed. And it had worked.

Charlie flattened himself against the wall and peered down at the



people passing by below. Two of the female maids laughed while a third walked behind with one of the footmen, clearly in one another's confidence.

He waited, hoping they would move along quickly so he wouldn't have to remain there for very long. A small part of Charlie knew there was a risk he would be stuck for quite some time, that he might not be able to get away unless the staff moved along.

But they were taking their time, going slowly and chatting away about this or that thing that had happened. One young woman mocked Lady Bregman, doing an impression of Pippa's mother as she demanded softer potatoes with their dinners. The others howled with laughter.

But, at last, they rounded the corner of the estate, and their voices started to fade slightly. Charlie had to wait, now aware that there were those still wandering. There might be others who would come out for a little while, or it was possible that any of these four could have dropped something and need to come back for it. If he took the risk of trying to escape right now, his chance of being discovered was far greater.

Charlie sighed and remained flat against the wall. There was only a narrow space of stone, so part of his body was in front of the door to the balcony, but so long as no one came inside, he would be—

He heard the door at the same moment he saw the glow from the corner of his eye. A candle had entered the room and, presumably, a person holding it as well.

Slowly, with great fear, Charlie turned his head and saw Lady Pippa. Her eyes landed on his and grew wide in the glow of the flame, and

Charlie saw her gasp.

Too late to escape, Charlie had been caught.

## Chapter 9

Pippa's terror caught in her throat, choking her from the scream that welled inside. But the moment she froze gave her just the second needed to observe what was happening before her very eyes.

There were papers in the window once more, possibly another musical score. And the man in the window. Was it possible?

Her lips parted in understanding. This was the handsome musician from the symposium, the one she had just seen again in the road. He was the one who had left her the sheet music? He was the one who had come to her window?

Perfectly aware of the danger at hand, Pippa nearly ran screaming, desperate to cry out to her mother and father. Who was this madman? Why had she allowed herself to be intrigued by him when he was clearly a threat to her safety? Who could be so bold as to come to her window and night like this? What if he tried to get inside?

But the man instead tried to scramble away, and Pippa knew she had the upper hand now. If he was on the trellis, she could end his life in an instant by pushing him. With that in mind, Pippa rushed out onto the balcony and grasped hold of the trellis. The man had barely made it a few steps down before he looked up at her with panic.

"N-no! Please! I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you," he said desperately.

“What are you doing here? You had best explain yourself, or I shall gladly push this trellis from the house and send you flying,” she threatened.

“I mean you no harm,” he insisted.

“Ha! No harm? You are coming to my room at night. Do you expect me to believe that you are not going to kill me?”

“Kill you?” he repeated in horror. “I would never! I honestly mean you no harm. I only wanted to leave you this music.”

“But why? Why would you come up here like this? I am going to call for my father, and he will get the constable. You are a madman if ever I saw one,” she hissed.

“I know that it was foolish of me, but I wrote these pieces for you, and I wanted you to hear them,” he said.

Pippa froze and swallowed the part of her that found it terribly romantic. She didn't want to swoon just because this man had done something so lovely. He was still utterly mad for his actions and trying to sneak up here.

“Why would you write music for me?” she demanded.

“Because ... oh, I know that it sounds positively foolish of me, but you are my muse. I think you are the most astonishing woman I have ever

met. Although I never imagined I would be able to speak with you again, I hope you know I never meant you any harm. I only admired you and wanted you to have something to mark that admiration,” he said.

Pippa was taken aback. She couldn’t imagine what had led this man to care about her so much. What was going on in his mind that he thought this was not only appropriate but also sane? Did he have no understanding of society’s rules?

And why was it that despite knowing all these things, Pippa’s heart was racing with excitement, and she was thrilled to see this man once more, even under these circumstances?

Pushing away the ridiculous wonder she felt, Pippa tried to be stern again. She couldn’t let her heart get the best of her, not now. With all the moments she had spent thinking about him and wishing she could see him again, she could not allow this to continue.

“You must not come here again,” Pippa said. “While I think it is very ... well, whatever I may think of it, you surely know that this is not appropriate. My mother and father would have your head if you were caught out here, and I cannot bear to be the cause of your death. Do you think you can get away without being seen? You will need to move quickly. My father often goes for an evening walk, and he is probably getting ready now,” Pippa said.

She saw the sudden worry in his eyes, but he nodded quickly.

“Yes, I will go. Please, do not tell anyone. I will not return. I will stay away,” he promised.

At that moment, Pippa was simultaneously glad, and her heart sank. What was it about this man that intrigued her so much, and why was she allowing herself to be this curious? Or this kind? He could not possibly be a sane, stable man if he was coming to her window and leaving her music; that was clearly the act of someone who had no idea how to behave in society.

The man jumped down from the trellis, stumbled slightly, but scampered off quickly and ran towards the trees before anyone else could see him.

Pippa wondered who he really was and how he had found out her identity. How had he known where her estate was? How had he known her room? Had he been watching her?

Although she knew this was too strange to be flattered, Pippa couldn't help it. She had been so intrigued by this man. Now she was coming to find that he had been interested in her as well. Had he really cared for her? Was he simply a madman, or was he also someone who was sensitive and gentle and really wanted to get to know her?

Pippa pushed her wonder away. He could be dangerous, after all. Finding him charming was the last thing she needed to do. It would only force her into a place of poor decisions and foolish hopes. Whoever he was, this musician needed to stay away, or he would find himself in grave danger.

She turned to go back inside but pulled the papers from the window and unfolded them to find the melody he had written. It was a lengthy piece titled *The Golden One* and Pippa subconsciously fiddled with her blonde hair, wondering if it had been the inspiration.

The wise thing would have been to throw the pages to the wind and forget them. But Pippa did not do the wise thing. Instead, she placed them beside her bed so she could play the piece when she woke in the morning.

## Chapter 10

Charlie was deeply ashamed as he sat in his room in the small house he rented with Joseph and his brothers. He couldn't believe he had allowed things to happen this way. With all his thoughts to slowly woo Lady Pippa, he had absolutely ruined it.

She had not only been frightened by him, but she appeared angry as well. He could hardly blame her for this. After all, what woman would be complimented by the pauper sneaking up to her window in the darkness? It was a miracle that he had not been shackled and taken away by the constable.

Moreover, what if she found out who he was? Lady Pippa knew he frequented the music shop, and she could go there to ask about him. And once she found out his name, she could ruin his reputation and have him thrown in prison.

Why had he thought this was a good idea? Why had he allowed his heart to lure him into such madness? If he had just been patient, he might have found a way to meet her again without having to do something so extreme.

Charlie sat at the small desk in the corner and sighed. He had never done anything like this before. He had always been known for having a good head on his shoulders. Whatever foolishness he was willing to undertake for the sake of Lady Pippa, he would never forgive himself for pushing it this far. He would never allow himself to do something like this again for the sake of a woman.

He had wanted her to be impressed by him and to know that she was



admired by a man, that she might even find it romantic in some way. But instead of that, Lady Pippa had thought only ill of him, which he certainly understood.

There was a knock on the door, and Charlie looked up, forlorn and dismayed.

“Come in,” he called.

Joseph entered the room with a bright smile and ease of mind. After one glance at Charlie, his smile faltered.

“What is the matter? You look terrible,” Joseph said.

“Yes, well, that is what happens when a man does something rather foolish and then must face its consequences,” he said.

“Oh, dear. What is it now? Surely you cannot have done something all that dreadful,” Joseph replied.

“You would be shocked by my idiocy. But enough with that, what is it?” Charlie asked, pushing away his regret and moving on to whatever news Joseph had.

“I came to tell you that we have received a request to perform the music at another ball. Lord Willingham’s, to be precise. It is the finest ball of the season, I am told,” Joseph said.

“Why would the finest ball of the season want only a quartet like ours? Would they not prefer something grander?” Charlie asked.

“I was curious about that myself, which is why I asked around a bit. From what I have heard, Lady Willingham had a falling out with Lady Devonbrook,” Joseph began, clearly finding the whole drama to be rather amusing.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Charlie asked, knowing how petty some of the noblewomen could be.

“Lady Devonbrook apparently hosted a grand ball, and she invited half of London. She is a woman who likes to show off her home and wealth and ensured that anyone who could come was there to see how well off she and her husband are,” he continued. “Well, Lady Willingham has decided to do quite the opposite.”

“What do you mean?”

“She wanted her ball to be so exclusive that men and women would clamour for her favour. They have claimed that her ball is only for the most elite in all of London. She has managed to spread the word that a large ball is tacky and desperate, but one like hers is classy and elegant,” Joseph said, still struggling not to laugh at the pettiness.

“And that means that she needs only a quartet,” Charlie said, now understanding precisely why they had been asked.

“Indeed. And that is wonderful for us. Now, we may spend our time being paid a fortune to play and know that the others at the ball can also afford to pay us a fortune. What do you say?” Joseph asked eagerly.

Charlie grinned, thankful for some good news at last.

“I say it is a wonderful opportunity, and I am glad that we shall be able to play for Lady Willingham,” he replied.

This would not only give him a chance to think about something other than Lady Pippa, but it was also going to be an excellent opportunity for them to make an income. It was going to help them thrive in a way they desperately needed.

He was still discouraged by Lady Pippa and wanted to make himself busy in some other way. Even if he couldn't fix all his problems, just making a small amount of progress in some way would help.

Perhaps if he could push past this experience, he would never again have to face her. He had never seen her before the party for her aunt and, although he had seen her twice since, Charlie knew that he could find his way around ever having to face her again.

His heart sank when he thought about what a danger that might be, bumping into her once more. Nevertheless, he considered that she had been kind. If she were going to have him taken off and thrown into jail, she would have done so that evening, would she not? Or was she still so shocked that she simply hadn't thought about what she might do next? Perhaps she would still go to her father and ask him to take care of the matter.

“Charlie? What is it? Why are you so upset? I can see it in your eyes that something is amiss. You must tell me,” Joseph urged.

Charlie looked down in shame, knowing that Joseph would be furious with him—and for good reason.

“I know not how to tell you this, but I have made a grave error,” he confessed.

“Oh, dear. After what you told me the other day, I cannot possibly imagine,” Joseph said.

“Well, you can. You can imagine it because you warned me against it,” Charlie said.

“You returned to her home? Have you gone after Lady Pippa once more?” Joseph asked in a mix of surprise and irritation.

“I fear that I have. And, much to my dismay, she caught me,” he admitted.

“No!” Joseph shouted, turning from Charlie and facing the door for a moment, as though he couldn’t even bear to face Charlie.

“I know it was a mistake to return, but I could not stop myself. I wish I could explain it, but there is something about that woman. She just

... she is like an elixir, Joseph,” Charlie said.

Joseph turned to him and shook his head sternly.

“That is nonsense, Charlie. You must exercise wisdom. I never thought you would be the sort of man to stalk a woman,” Joseph accused.

“But that is not what this is!” he insisted.

“Are you certain? Because it sounds that way to me,” Joseph replied in anger.

Charlie wasn’t sure how to explain it so that Joseph could understand. He was trying to be romantic. Why did no one understand that? Had he truly lost his mind?

“Why was it all right for my father but not me?” he asked.

“You keep speaking about your father, but he and your mother were of the same station,” Joseph reminded him.

“What difference does that make? Why does her birth make my father an artist and me a madman? Why did it make my mother swoon and Lady Pippa frightened?” he asked.

“Because your mother had the luxury of being acquainted with men

like us. Lady Pippa is the sort of wealthy woman who men might fawn over in hopes that she will raise their status. She has to be more cautious of a man's intentions," Joseph said.

Charlie understood that reason, but he disagreed, thinking all women must be cautious of a man's intentions. So, how could he prove that his intentions were pure? Clearly, he could not sneak up there again and leave her a note to apologise. But was there another way? Even if it were something more direct, perhaps he could find a way to send her a card sharing his regrets for having frightened her.

No. The best thing now was to respect her wishes and stay away. That was the only thing that would bring her comfort and help her to see that he was not mad after all. He would leave her alone and wallow in his own sadness at having ruined every chance he'd ever had to speak with her.

"What are you going to do, Charlie?" Joseph asked.

"I am going to do what I ought to have done from the beginning," he answered. "I am going to stay away from her and live with the knowledge that I could never have had anything more than the gift of her beauty passing me by."

"And that is enough to satisfy you? That is enough to stop you from chasing after her and doing any more harm to yourself?"

"It has to be. Now that she has been in my life, I cannot imagine a world without her. Nevertheless, I have no choice. She must be gone from me, and I must accept it. There is little else for me in this world, but what of it? I am the man I am because I was born to it, just as she was born to who she is. If we could not accept our fates, we would be

miserable. Well, here is mine,” Charlie said.

Joseph sighed with compassion and sat next to Charlie. He scratched his head as though deep in thought, trying to come up with a solution. Charlie, however, already knew there was none to be had. This was simply the way of things, and he was grateful that he was not spending his night in prison.

“Is there nothing I might do to try and aid you?” Joseph asked.

“How could you? I am in this place because of my own foolish hopes, Joseph. You are a stronger, better man than I. If a day comes in which I might be near her again, all I ask is that you remind me I have no choice but to walk away from her. Anything else is a detriment to my life. Whatever the cost, I cannot see her or speak with her ever again,” he said.

“Indeed, that is the best thing, no matter how difficult it may be. You should not worry, Charlie. You will find happiness one day. I am sure of it. Although it will not be with this woman, you cannot give up hope that the right lady is out there,” Joseph told him.

But Charlie was certain he would never notice another woman again. He did not care if she was wealthy or not, beautiful or not, nobility or not. No one in the world compared to Lady Pippa, and that was all there was to it. He would write her songs that she would never hear and play them day and night, knowing she was out there somewhere, probably married to a duke.

He simply hoped that she would be happy wherever she found herself. As long as she could be happy, he would be all right. And if she was not?

That would break his heart all over again.



## Chapter 11

Pippa checked the heavy candleholder she'd placed in front of the locked window. The sun was breaking through the curtains, but she kept them closed for now. It was the best way to be sure that she was not being watched. And if he did come again to leave music, and if he did manage to get past the lock on the window, the candleholder would fall and alert her to his presence.

What surprised Pippa the most was that she was not frightened. She wanted to be wise and felt this was a necessary precaution, but she was not actually afraid of the man.

Perhaps it was because she'd already been somewhat intrigued by him or because she found him to be a rather handsome and charming man. Still, she knew that this lack of fear was a problem. It signalled to Pippa that she was prone to foolishness and could truly get herself into a great deal of trouble if she was not careful.

Despite her better judgement, she had not told her mother and father about the incident. She did not believe the man to be a threat, just misguided in his attempts to woo her.

Then again, was he really that misguided? After all, she had actually found the gesture to be deeply romantic even though it was also unwise. Pippa didn't want to think about it that way. She was still dubious of his actions, even if she did swoon a bit when she considered them.

Once Pippa ensured that everything was secure, she finished getting ready for the day and headed downstairs. After a nice breakfast with

her mother and father—nice because they barely spoke at all rather than bickering—she made her way to the drawing room and sat down at the pianoforte to play.

Pippa quickly warmed up, playing her scales as she always did. One of the keys was beginning to sound as though it needed tuning. Still, she went ahead and began practicing, starting out with the first song that the man had given her. Even now, when she knew where it came from, the melody haunted her in the loveliest way. But when she considered that this exquisite longing had been written for her specifically, Pippa's heart ached with delight.

After she played through the piece a couple of times, she began working on the next one, taking a deep breath before she dove into the first attempt.

It was somewhat more complex, and she was not sure that she would manage to get it perfect even with a few days of practice, but she didn't mind taking her time with it. This piece was meant for her and her alone. It was exciting to know that she was the only woman in the world who had the chance to hear it.

As she listened to the tone of it, Pippa was amazed at how the man had managed to bring in some of those sounds from other countries like she had heard at the symposium. Little things in the notes struck her. It was as though some notes that would not belong ... belonged. She recognised that it was simply how other nations created music, and it was delightful that she would get to play something similar.

This one was also more upbeat than the first. It did not have quite the same mournful quality. While it maintained a longing, it had hope to it.

The door of the drawing room burst open, startling Pippa as she sat with the music and causing her to make an ugly mess of a chord.

“Pippa! There you are! Oh, we’ve just had the most wonderful news,” her mother said, rushing over and sitting on the piano bench beside Pippa.

“What is it, Mother?” she asked, leaning back slightly. She was anxious that this would have something to do with a man.

“Have you heard of Lord Ganton?” her mother asked eagerly.

Indeed ... it was about a man.

“No, Mother, I have not,” Pippa replied.

“He is just the most wonderful man in all of England. Well, he is now. He has not been in England for quite some time. As it happens, he has returned to us, and he is here to stay. He is also exceedingly wealthy, known for his quality of character, and is of an age that you would be more inclined to consider decent,” her mother insisted.

Pippa groaned internally but tried to remain calm for her mother’s sake.

“I see. And where has this Lord Ganton been all this time?” she asked.

“He has been abroad for work. It is such a shame that he had not returned in time for the symposium as your father tells me he would have been of the utmost intrigue to many of the men there. You absolutely must meet him and see if he fits your ridiculously high standards for a match,” her mother said.

“Mother, my standards are not unreasonable. I simply want to marry a good man who will treat me well,” Pippa said.

“Yes, yes, I know all that. But you must go and meet Lord Ganton. You would do well to take your time and make a fine impression, all the while not judging him at first blush. Remember that he has been away from England for many years, and if he is not a perfect gentleman as his reputation says he is, it could be simply because he has been gone for so long,” her mother said.

“I see. Well, I shall do my best to give him a chance, Mother. But why are you so eager? You wanted me to marry Lord Manning, did you not?” Pippa asked, making an effort to subtly remind her mother that she had been mistaken in the past and had been quite determined that Pippa should give Lord Manning another chance.

“Oh, hush. You have made it clear that you are unhappy with his intentions. I have decided to give you this opportunity to meet a man you may actually come to appreciate. He is very handsome, from what I have heard. And I do recall hearing about him years ago when he was just twenty-two and setting out on his adventures to foreign lands so that he might create a grand business that is worthy of the British Empire,” her mother said.

Pippa had very little interest in Lord Ganton’s adventures but also knew she ought to give him a chance. She knew nothing about him

yet, not really. If he were a good man, she could be happy for having had the chance to get to know him. But she would not learn anything until she allowed herself to push aside whatever prejudice she might feel at first, given her mother's insistence upon Pippa spending time near him.

"Are you planning to have him come for dinner?" Pippa asked, wondering where she was supposed to meet this Lord Ganton.

"No, he is going to be at the Willingham ball. I do not even know this gentleman, so it is very important that we make a fine impression and that we take this grand opportunity to meet him and show him what lovely ladies of England we are. It is only after that when I may find a chance to invite him for dinner one evening," her mother explained.

"If he is so worthy of my interest, are you not frightened that the mother of another young woman might get to him first?" Pippa asked.

"I am sure that many will try, but I have no doubt that it is my Pippa who will capture his interests," she replied.

For some reason, Pippa could only think of the musician. He flashed into her mind, and she wondered where he was at that moment and why she could not find him and dance with him instead of all these men her mother chose for her.

Was he out there, even now? Was he hiding among the trees and waiting for Pippa to come to him? Was he going to leave her another piece of music?

She scolded herself for those thoughts, remembering that what he had done crossed a line of propriety and that he was clearly not in his right mind. But it was so very hard for Pippa to hold onto that thought.

“Anyway, I am thrilled we purchased that large ruby necklace and that your shoes will be completed in time for the ball. Lord Ganton is going to see you and think you are the most stunning woman his eyes have ever laid upon,” her mother said.

“Perhaps, Mother. I do hope that I am not a disappointment to him or you,” Pippa said.

“Nonsense. You could not possibly disappoint him. And so long as you make an adequate impression, I shall not be disappointed either. I trust that you will do your best and that Lord Ganton will see that my daughter is far better than any of the other young women being paraded around him,” her mother declared.

“We shall see, Mother,” Pippa replied.

“And when we do have him here for dinner, you must play for him. You have been practicing more than I have ever heard before. I know that you play well, but you have seemed particularly keen on the pianoforte of late,” her mother noted.

Pippa smiled to cover her nervousness at the statement.

“Well, I know it is important for a young woman to do her best in all things and to perform adequately. I trust that Lord Ganton will be

happy when I play for him,” she said.

“And what are these newest pieces you have been playing? I have not heard them before, but you play them so often these days,” her mother said.

“I do not recall where they came from, but I found them among my other music. Perhaps I have had them for years and simply allowed them to be buried,” Pippa reasoned, knowing that she had more than enough sheet music to have lost a few pages here and there.

“I suppose it is possible. But I play every once in a great while as well and never saw them. Oh, well, never mind. I am not here to discuss music, but rather a handsome and cultured gentleman who is going to sweep you away and give you a grand new life,” her mother said.

“Thank you for informing me, Mother. I shall be ready to meet him at the ball,” Pippa said.

Of course, in her heart, she had no desire to spend even more time attempting to gain the attention of a man her mother chose. She knew nothing at all about Lord Ganton. If he were a decent man, she would be happy, but would that mean love? Just because he was nicer than the others, did it really mean that she was willing to settle for him?

Pippa couldn't think of anything more dull than accepting the interest of a man purely because she had been forced to. Still, if he was everything her mother said, maybe he was the only choice she had. Maybe he would prove to be better than the others not only because he was kind, but maybe interesting as well. After all, he had travelled a good deal.

Maybe he would speak to her about music boxes and instruments and choruses of a different tone than what was found in England.

Or, perhaps, there was only one man in London with whom she could discuss these things. Perhaps there was only one who knew any of it. And if Pippa accepted that she was interested only in that man, she would have to discern whether or not he was worth a very great risk.

She would have to put herself in the position of learning whether he was stunningly romantic—or a dangerous lunatic.



## Chapter 12

Charlie looked to Joseph, Simon, and Nathan before he gave a nod. It was time to begin.

Joseph lovingly scraped his bow along the strings in a long, gentle stride before adding the delicate vibrato. He held it as long as he could before the entire quartet jumped into a lively tune that sent dancers into the middle of the floor with excitement in their eyes.

It was the first dance of the night, and Charlie was thrilled to play something so exciting to get things started. He watched as the men twirled the women in a perfectly choreographed motion that the dancers all knew well.

He played the music with passion, striking notes as though they were falling of their own accord. There was no reason to force the music to come when it was so ready and willing to do so on its own. Charlie didn't need to think or read the sheet music. He only had to move through the tune with his friends as they always did.

He sensed they felt quite the same. Looking up at them, the three were all looking at one another and Charlie in return, rather than keeping their eyes trained on the pages.

Yes, there were melodies ahead that would require them to slow down, to play with a rather different heart, songs that would insist they take their time. But for now, they could engage in the joy and know they were doing their very best to give the men and women a night to remember.

As the song drew to a conclusion, the mood in the room was one of wonder. Charlie estimated only forty or so people in attendance and wondered if this really was all it would be or if more were coming. It was hardly a ball and more of a dinner party at this rate, but he could see Lady Willingham's pride as she gazed upon the group she had chosen.

Before the second tune began, Lord Willingham stepped forward and tapped a knife on his glass.

"Good evening, friends. While there are still many guests yet to arrive, we wish to get the evening's festivities started at once. I should also like to honour my dear friend, Lord Ganton, who has just returned to us from his travels across the East," Lord Willingham announced, ushering the young man forward.

He was likely in his early thirties, with a mop of sand-coloured hair on his head and a small nick on his chin where he had apparently cut himself shaving. Charlie assumed that he probably didn't worry too much about keeping his face clean while he had been abroad.

"Lord Ganton was kind enough to attend this evening even though he is resting from his long journey home to England. I trust that you shall all give him a wonderful welcome back and parade your lovely daughters before him because this is a man who will not long be unmarried," Lord Willingham said with a laugh, looking mischievously through the crowd.

Charlie watched as a few mothers turned to their daughters and immediately began whispering with excitement.

Lord Ganton, however, looked horrified and embarrassed that he was being auctioned off in this way, and Charlie could not help feeling sorry for him. He seemed to be a decent gentleman from this first observation. He did not stand with the same arrogant stance as so many of the others.

Still, Charlie figured he must have a good deal in common with the others if he was invited to the party that evening. Even if he had been away all this time, he would know how to move along in England.

“Oh! It looks like we have an influx of more guests,” Lord Willingham said as a dozen or so people came through the door into the hall. “I suppose that is a sign for us to continue!”

As Lord Willingham took a step back, Charlie gasped. One of those who had just entered was Lady Pippa!

Charlie turned to Joseph, who looked at him with great worry. All Charlie could do was try to sink back behind the sheet music and hope that Lady Pippa would not see him there. If she caught him, she might send her father after him or be angry and yell at him.

Suddenly, he was terrified and wished he could run from the hall, but that would only draw more attention to himself, and everyone would notice him. If Lady Pippa chased after him, he would be utterly out of luck. It was a terrible situation to be in, and Charlie said a silent prayer that he could remain hidden the entire night.

“Do nothing,” Joseph said in warning. “If she catches you—”

“I know,” he said in a harsh whisper. “Just start playing again, and I will remain hidden back here. I cannot allow her to see me, or she may finally have me dealt with. I am not sure what to do, but perhaps you and your brothers might try to stand a little further in front of me.”

Joseph sighed in frustration and took a step forward, urging his brothers to do the same. Then, Joseph turned to him quickly.

“Just allow me to remind you that she saw me with you in town as well as her aunt’s party. If we are lucky, she will not remember me. But if she does, no amount of hiding will save you,” he warned.

Joseph was right. Charlie hoped that Lady Pippa wouldn’t see or notice either of them, but with Joseph at the front, their chances were grim.

But Charlie was fortunate when Lady Pippa did not look in their direction as they started the music again. She was too busy with her mother, who immediately urged her towards Lord Ganton. Despite not having been there for Lord Willingham’s speech, it seemed that Lady Pippa’s mother knew exactly who this man was and wanted her daughter to present herself before him.

But the thing that bothered Charlie the most was that Lady Pippa seemed to be all right with this. She did not shy away from him or look upset as he wished she had. Instead, she gave a genuine smile, and Lord Ganton was clearly taken aback by her in return.

Charlie breathed deeply and tried to pay attention to the tune he was playing, not wanting to let this cause him to make a mistake. If he

made even one error in his playing, it would jeopardise the quartet's ability to get any future jobs playing at parties or other events.

He looked at Joseph and the others, all of whom were deep into the music and playing to the best of their ability. Charlie tried to go along with it. Despite his technical ability, he realised that his heart was not in the music now. And from the glare Joseph tossed his way, the lack of heart had not gone unnoticed.

By the end of the dance, Charlie had to try and rally himself to play the next. But that was when he saw Lord Ganton leading Lady Pippa to the dance floor, and Charlie knew this would only make things more difficult for him.

"Please do not ruin this," Joseph said, looking at him sternly.

Joseph was right. Charlie couldn't ruin it. He had to play well, and he had to play with passion. But what fuelled him this time was not his love for music but rather his anguish at watching her with another man.

The dance seemed to last forever, and with each repeated stanza, Charlie mourned. Still, he ensured that the song was played to its fullness and that Lady Pippa had ample time to laugh and smile with Lord Ganton. If she liked him, Charlie would have to accept it and be happy for her. That was the right thing to do.

Still, as the notes dwindled to a conclusion, he was relieved when Lady Pippa parted ways from that man and returned to where her mother and aunt were standing. She seemed to have much to say and was quite happy with how things had gone for her.

Charlie decided he had no choice but to ignore her for the rest of the evening, and he did so by putting himself completely into the music and not giving himself even a moment to be weak and feel the self-pity that welled up within him.

Dance after dance passed by with numbness, and Lady Pippa danced with a couple of other gentlemen, but her eyes were not so bright as with Lord Ganton, and she didn't bother with much conversation. After each dance, Charlie reminded himself that he was meant to be ignoring her, but then he would only fail again.

At last, the evening was halfway through, and it was time for them to take a few moments to make their way to the servants' quarters for a drink and a trip to the toilet if necessary.

"Are you all right?" Joseph asked him.

"I honestly cannot say. I wish that I cared nothing about her, but there is something about Lady Pippa that I cannot possibly ignore. She is different from other women," Charlie said.

"You only think that because she is beautiful and you know so few other women," Joseph told him.

"I wish it were that, but I do not believe it is. I just want to shut off my heart and focus on the music we are here to play, but when I saw how she looked at Lord Ganton, I started to ache," he confessed.

“She looked at him in the same way all the young ladies have looked at him. I think she is merely curious about him. She has been so unimpressed by everyone else that, perhaps, a man who is different and who has been to foreign places just provides intrigue,” Joseph said.

“Do you really think so?”

“I do. But that does not mean I would ever encourage you to pursue her. I still believe you are mad and want you to be wise. Now, may we get back to playing?” Joseph asked.

“Very well. I shall be there soon. I need another glass of water before I return,” Charlie said.

With that, Joseph and his brothers made their way back towards the hall while Charlie got another drink. Once sated, he headed back as well. As Charlie turned a corner, he bumped straight into someone. When he looked up, his heart immediately started to race.

“Y—you,” said Lady Pippa, her eyes wide in astonishment.

“I promise, I did not follow you here. I was hired to come. Weeks ago. I have not returned to you,” he said in a hurry, the words spilling out before he could stop them. He needed to be sure that she was not frightened and didn’t think he was coming after her by playing that evening.

“You were the pianist,” she said slowly with realisation. It seemed she remembered him from the first night they met, the night of her aunt’s

party. Charlie didn't say anything at once, still uncertain whether or not she was going to call to have him removed from there.

She took a long, deep breath and then looked him in the eye once more.

"I remember you now. I could not place you before, back when we met at the symposium. But I remember you now," she said.

"And you shall never have to see me again, I assure you," Charlie said to calm her nerves.

But something strange struck him about her at that moment. She did not appear nervous at all. If anything, she appeared relieved.



## Chapter 13

At last! Pippa finally knew who he was! After all this time of wondering and being desperate to figure out the identity of this stranger, she could hardly believe that she finally had the opportunity to meet him and know who he really was.

It had taken her so long to figure out who this man was, but now she was seeing him in person and wondering what to say. She needed to know if he was dangerous. Now, she would have an answer.

“Please, do not rush away. I want to know who you are and why you have been sneaking music to my room,” she said.

He looked shyly away and gave a small shrug.

“I know that it was unwise, that I was doing something many would consider to be wrong or even criminal. But when I first saw you, I knew that you were unlike any other woman I have ever known. Not only that, but I was struck by your elegance and grace, and I knew in my heart that it had to be put to music. *You* had to be put to music.

She hesitated, aware of the flutter in her chest, but he began to speak before she could say anything more.

“I am sorry that I crossed a line in my admiration for you. I know you must have been afraid, and I grieve if I caused you any harm at all, but I must tell you that you are the most inspiring thing in all the world,” he said.

There was something about his words, something that soothed her. Despite her better judgement, she found that she was actually swooning. There was no reason for this. She knew that she shouldn't and that she still ought to be wary of him. And yet, she was intrigued more than anything.

"Why should I trust you?" Pippa asked, finding the balance between her feelings and the awareness that she shouldn't so easily cater to them.

"Do you mean that you think I am capable of harming you?" he asked.

"I mean, there is no reason I ought to trust a man like you, someone who has come to my room. Why should I not call for the constable right this instant?" she asked, the threat not meaning much as she spoke it. But he did not know that.

"Honestly, I am shocked that you have not. I fully expected you to tell your mother and father about me and to find me and have me taken to the stocks," he said with a nervous laugh.

She did not smile, instead looking at him uncertainly and waiting for him to give her a true answer. He cleared his throat, seeing she was unamused, and took a deep breath.

"Honestly, Lady Pippa, I mean it when I say that I have no wish to harm you and that I shall stay away from you. I only wished to show you my admiration and to give you the songs meant for you. Outside of those things, I do believe that it is best if I leave you be as I can see

it is what you wish,” he said.

“What is your name?” Pippa asked, realising he had just spoken hers, but she still did not know his.

He stuttered for a moment, clearly frightened to tell her. But Pippa believed she deserved the truth in this at least.

“Charlie Thomas,” he answered. “Or Charles, if you prefer.”

“I prefer Charlie,” she said, unable to stop herself from smiling at that.

Pippa found herself more curious than ever. She wanted answers, but she was beginning to realise that those answers wouldn’t help. Nothing would help the spark that had begun in her heart. No matter how foolish it was, she couldn’t ignore the attraction she felt for the curiosity.

His eyes were bright, but Pippa tried to ignore the youthful gaze in them. She knew it was a mistake, allowing him to speak freely like this and giving him a chance to charm her.

“You do understand that this is very foolish of me, do you not? I should not be speaking so openly with a man who has done what you have,” she said.

“I assure you, Lady Pippa, that I understand,” he said.

“Very well. And you should also know that I find you very interesting. Any man who is willing to take such a risk as you have is either a madman or a prince in disguise,” she said, unable to stop herself despite the suspicious smile on her lips. She was amused by him, intrigued, attracted, and wary all at once, and she couldn’t quite sort through any of those feelings.

“Would you be interested to know that the next dance is also a song I wrote in your honour? Of course, I was unaware that you would be here this evening, but we have learned it well, and we’re eager to play it this evening for the first time,” he said.

Her heart raced, and Pippa bit her lip, looking up at him with even more interest than she’d already had. Whatever he was thinking and whatever he was doing, he had done well to draw her in.

“That is a very foolish thing for you to do,” she said.

“And why is that?”

“Because I worry that I shall not be able to stop looking in your direction if you play it,” she said.

“I fear that it is already too late. We have prepared and rehearsed it, and my friends would be annoyed if I told them last minute about a change,” he said.

Pippa’s eyes widened.

“Oh, good heavens! How long have we been standing here?” she asked.

At once, he went into a panic.

“You are correct; I must go. But I shall play the song for you, Lady Pippa. And when you hear it, remember that it is only and forever for you,” he said.

With that, Charlie Thomas went racing back towards the hall, and Pippa stood there in shock for a moment. It was so difficult to believe this had happened, that she had seen the man again and now knew precisely who he was.

However, Pippa also needed to get back to the hall. It would be time to dance soon and, much to her dismay, she realised that her dance card was already full for the next song. Indeed, the very song that Charlie dedicated to her, she was meant to be dancing with none other than Lord Ganton.

She tried not to show her disappointment as she entered the hall. Already, the musicians were gearing up again, and she saw Charlie going over to the piano. Almost at once, her father came over with a look in his eyes, warning her to be quick.

Her mother rushed over with Lord Ganton in tow. The kind-looking man smiled at Pippa and held out his hand.

“Lady Pippa, if you would join me for the dance?” he asked.

She smiled and took his hand, allowing him to lead her out to the dance floor. She glanced over at Charlie, whose brow twitched as though he were in pain. Pippa knew her eyes held a sad apology, but she also realised it was foolish to apologise to a man like him. She did not belong to him, after all.

“You look lovely,” Lord Ganton commented, smiling at her politely.

“Thank you, Lord Ganton,” she replied. “You are too kind.”

“Nonsense. I am merely stating what I see to be true. Then again, I have no doubt that men tell you constantly how beautiful you are, and it must be rather irritating to hear it again and again, not knowing if a man is being genuine or not. I do apologise if I am simply one more of those men who are doing their utmost to woo you,” he said with a laugh.

Pippa was surprised that she could genuinely laugh in kind. He was right. She was constantly receiving similar compliments, but what else was a man supposed to say when he was trying to court a woman or when he had the pressure of her mother and father at his back? Lord Ganton was at least able to say it as it was and point out the reality.

Still, she found herself looking at Charlie and seeing that he was uncomfortable. It was then that Pippa took a moment to listen to the tune that he was playing for her. It was a song of hope, a lilting melody with gentle trills and delightful little phrases throughout. She couldn't help melting as she listened and wished that it was not Lord Ganton's arms in which she melted, but rather Charlie's.

That thought startled her as well. Why was she allowing herself even to consider something like that? He was the man who had been sneaking to her window! He was not someone to admire or to think of so highly.

And yet, Pippa could not help herself.

“Your mother and father, they have quite strong reputations in society,” Lord Ganton remarked, regaining Pippa’s attention.

“Yes, they do. My father is quite prominent in trade, which I am sure is the reason he admires you so much. And my mother is very in tune with the things of society,” she said, as delicately as possible.

“Ah, I see. So you mean that she is the one all the ladies run to with gossip?” he teased.

Pippa could not help chuckling once more, impressed by his wit and humour, but she felt no spark of interest despite his kindness and how amusing he was. While she felt she could see him as a very good friend, he was not the sort of man with whom she could fall in love.

It was at that moment when Pippa realised she had already made her decision. For better or worse, she knew what would make her happiest, and she knew with certainty that this was the thing she would do.

When the dance came to a close, Lord Ganton bowed, and Pippa curtsied.

“Thank you for the lovely dance,” he said.

“And you, My Lord. I am most grateful,” she said.

Pippa’s mother rushed over to them at once, preening about her daughter.

“Lord Ganton, is she not the most graceful dancer you have ever seen?” she asked.

“Indeed, Lady Bregman. Your daughter is quite an angel,” he replied.

“Oh, you are too kind, Lord Ganton! Good heavens! Pippa, darling, did you hear the compliment? You must thank him at once,” her mother urged, fawning and batting her eyelashes as though she were a young maiden trying to bribe a suitor.

“Yes, thank you, My Lord. As I said before, you are too kind,” she said.

At that, Lord Ganton seemed as if he wanted to laugh and Pippa had to try not to as well, thinking about the conversation while they danced. Her mother was evidence of why men and women were constantly forced to put on such a show, and it was incredibly elaborate to work through such a meditated choreography.



“Well, now that I have had the pleasure of dancing with your daughter, Lady Bregman, I fear that I have committed to another dance, and I would be rude if I did not attend to my next dance partner. If you will excuse me,” he said, politely escaping and making his way towards Lady Collingsworth.

“Oh, dear. He is dancing with Lady Collingsworth’s daughter? Such a shame. He must know that he was fortunate to have danced with you first,” her mother said.

“Mother, please. Lord Ganton is a perfect gentleman, and he would not allow another young lady to suffer without a partner simply because he continued his conversation with the first. Surely you can agree that it would have been rude had he not come to dance with me when agreed upon,” Pippa said.

“Yes, but why would he? You are a far better prospect,” her mother said.

But Pippa disagreed. She hoped that Lord Ganton would pursue another young lady, after all.

The moment she found a chance to slip away, Pippa scurried into the empty study and found where paper and a quill were sitting nicely, just waiting for her. She dipped the pen in ink and wrote a simple note, just something short and anonymous. If anyone were to find it, they would not know she had been the author, nor to whom she was writing.

With that in mind, Pippa quickly blew upon the paper to dry the ink

before she folded the note in her hand, extremely small. If anyone were to speak to her before she made it to the recipient, she was unsure what she might do other than tuck it into the ribbon around her waist and hope it did not fall.

But she worked quickly, making her way back into the hall and staying along the wall as she slowly made her way closer to the musicians. In a spot where it was particularly crowded, she felt that she would have a decent amount of cover for her next action.

This close to the piano, she could feel Charlie's eyes on her. But when she glanced over, he looked down at the music in front of him. She was glad, worried that someone might see him noticing her. And at that moment, she flicked the paper onto the floor behind herself, just beside the instrument where she knew he would find it.

When she glanced back over at him, she saw his gaze drop to the paper and then back to his music. It was the hint of a smile that told her he knew exactly that the paper was meant for him.

## Chapter 14

It could have been a trap. That was the thought that echoed in Charlie's mind as he crept onto the grounds of Lady Pippa's estate that night. Perhaps she was luring him there, and the constable was already waiting.

But when he looked at the note once more, he tried to have faith that she had done no such thing.

*Meet me this evening at midnight. The tree line across from my window.*

It had set his soul aflame to see those words.

If she really had wanted him to come so that they could talk, Charlie was happier than words could express. This chance to spend some time with Lady Pippa would be a wonder.

He hid amongst the trees and waited, not sure what was going to come of this. But when he saw Lady Pippa coming out of the shadows like an angel, the moonlight setting her aglow, Charlie thought he would faint in wonder of her beauty.

"Lady Pippa," he said quietly.

"You came," she noted.

"I feared that you might be trying to trap me, that you would send the constable after me. But I came nevertheless, afraid of missing the chance to come here and see you. I was surprised by your request," he said.

"Yes, I am sure you were. In truth, I could not stop myself from asking you to come. I had only a moment to speak with you this evening, and I find I have a good deal more I wish to know," she said, her eyes telling him that she truly did want to know him better—and how much that fact frightened her.

"Did you sneak out of your house?" he asked.

"By now, everyone is asleep. It was very easy so long as I was quiet. My father goes for a walk every night, and I knew that if anyone saw me and asked about my being up at this hour, I could simply tell them that I was unable to sleep and wanted to go for a walk as father does. No one would have suspected anything," she said.

"That is lovely to know," Charlie said, still curious about why she was so willing to see him after what he had done.

"You must know that this is not something I ever imagined I would do. After all, you came to my window in a way that violated my privacy," she said. "But I should like to know why. Why did you take the risk? It cannot only be that you wanted to leave me the music you wrote for me. Something else must have inspired you."

Charlie glanced away and smiled, knowing he had a chance to tell her

about his mother and father.

“Indeed, I was inspired. I was inspired by my father. He was a musician, as I have already told you. And he used to sneak to my mother’s window and leave her the songs he had composed in her honour. I know that it was different for them. Although she did not know him just as you do not know me, they were of the same station, and it would not have created quite the scandal of my being caught at your home,” he said.

“It would not have been scandalous of him?” she asked, doubtful.

“Oh, it would have. But no one would have caused quite the uproar as with the daughter of a nobleman such as you,” he clarified.

“I see ...” Lady Pippa said. “Well, that is a shame. They ought to feel the same regardless of a woman’s status in society.”

“I very much agree with that, but unfortunately, it is not a fair world in which we live. However, my mother loved the music he wrote for her and, eventually, he introduced himself. Once he felt they had the connection for which he had hoped, he told her the truth of his identity,” Charlie said.

“And ... and you had hoped for the same thing? With me?” she asked.

Charlie blushed with embarrassment and was grateful that it was dark enough for him to hide it.

“I am well aware of the fact that I should have no hope with a woman of your station. However, I cannot stop myself from thinking about you and the inspiration you have already been to my work,” he said.

“And why is that? What is it about me that you find so interesting?” she asked.

“I can assure you that it is not simply your beauty, and I promise that your station has nothing at all to do with it. In fact, that would be the greatest hindrance to all the hopes a man such as I could have. But I do believe that I have never met someone like you in all my life,” he confessed.

“Yes, you have said that. But what does it *mean*?”

It was a very good question, and Charlie found it to be a surprise that she had asked him. He was not even sure what it meant. What was it that made her so unique? Why did he like her so much?

“I suppose it means that if I were ever to imagine the most perfect woman in all of creation, she would be a shadow of you,” he said, knowing it was the truest answer he could possibly give.

She blinked back in surprise before straightening her spine and adopting a proper posture.

“That is a very poetic claim for you to make,” she said.

"I cannot help that it is the truth. I know that I may sound like a fool, but I assure you that this is the only answer I can give. You have captivated me in every way, and there is nothing I might do to escape your grip," he confessed.

"Very well," she said, looking rather uncomfortable. "As I do not know how to respond to such a sentiment, allow me this. Will you give me the chance to ask more about you as the man that you are? Nothing of what you think of me or the poetry of how you care for me. Just tell me who you are, Charlie Thomas," she said.

"Very well," he replied, smiling in relief that this was all she wanted to know now.

"Come. Let us walk for a while. We shall see no one on this path," she said, leading him through the trees along a little path that had been quite well-worn.

"As for me, it is very much what I have told you already. My father was a musician who travelled a great deal. He died when I was still a boy, but the sort of boy who thought I was already a man," he said.

"That is very sad," Lady Pippa said with compassion.

"It was, indeed, but time moved onward. My mother had also passed away, and I found that I was on my own. I had little to my name. Just a few trinkets from each of them to remember them by. And I had my father's love of music. Well, my mother loved music as well, but she never had much of an opportunity to learn to play. She only learned the basics of the pianoforte from an aunt of hers who was rather well-to-do in comparison to her own family," he explained.

“Did your father ever teach her to play anything?” Lady Pippa asked.

“Indeed, he did. She eventually grew quite competent with the pianoforte, and she also mastered the harp,” he said.

“How remarkable,” she said. “I have always wished to be more skilled with the harp like my aunt.”

“It is a very beautiful instrument. I am sure your aunt would be happy to teach you,” he said.

“Oh, she has tried. My fingers are not quite nimble enough for it. I play the pianoforte adequately, but I cannot say I am any great proficient,” she confessed.

Charlie loved hearing these little things about her. He was also beginning to wonder if he might ever have the chance to teach her anything. After all, she was certainly very clever, and if she wanted to learn, why should he not try to find an opportunity to give her assistance?

“Perhaps you have put all your effort into learning to dance. You are a striking dancer. If ever I have the opportunity to teach you music, I do hope that I am able,” he said.

She smiled shyly at him, as though they both knew how unrealistic that was, but how much she longed for the chance.



"I can see that you would like that, but you know it would not be possible. Very well. I understand. Nevertheless, if the day should come when you wish for a chance to learn more, you must inform me somehow," he said.

"And how am I to do that? Shall I simply ask my mother and father if you may now come inside the house rather than climbing the trellis?" she asked.

Charlie laughed and shook his head.

"I feel strongly that they would not be inclined to consent to such a thing," he said.

"No, indeed, I think they would not. However, I should love the opportunity. Perhaps I might ask them if I could learn. Anyway, it hardly matters for now. You must continue telling me more about yourself. When did you first begin learning to play instruments?" she asked.

Charlie thought back to his boyhood and the life he had lived with his family. There was always music around. His father's friends would come by and play together. His mother would practice one of his compositions and entertain her friends with the music. Their home was always full of noise and delight. It was the thing Charlie loved most about it.

"I believe I started as soon as I was able to bend my fingers to my own will. My mother sat with me at the piano and showed me little tricks,

even while I was small enough to be on her lap the entire lesson. And my father would ask me which chord I would prefer when he ended a composition. Did I think the melody ought to brighten or darken? A sudden end or a long, slow decrescendo? They were always giving me these options, always speaking in terms of music. It was never difficult for me to grasp what they meant because it was so much a part of our home," he said.

"That is lovely," she said.

"Yes, it was. Still, I miss it. Even now, I think back to my life as a child and wonder what happiness my mother and father felt and how sad I am that they are gone," he told her.

But even now, as he mourned their absence, Charlie was happy that he had the luxury of their influence. He understood many in society did not have such a gift. He wished he could find a way to help others enjoy and hear the music, but it seemed unlikely. Perhaps, one day, he would find a way to help others, including Lady Pippa, learn new songs and new instruments and new ways of making music.

"Anyway, that is enough about me. Unless, of course, there is something more you wish to know to ensure I am not a madman. But if not, I should very much like to learn more about you," he said.

"As you wish. What may I tell you?" she offered.

"Tell me why you did not call for the constables at once when a man was outside on your balcony," he said, deeply curious.

Lady Pippa shied away for a moment, and he could not blame her for it. Of course she would not want to admit that she had a reason for not informing her mother and father. It was a strange thing she had done, protecting him like that.

But whatever her reason, he wanted to know. He wanted to understand if she cared for him or if she was just trying to gain some control of a life that was always controlled by others.

“If you must know, I was shocked to see that it was you, but I was also glad. Since our first meeting, I had wanted to meet you again. Well, as it happens, that was our second meeting. And then the third, of course. Regardless, I was not only shocked and appalled by your behaviour—I was also delighted,” she admitted.

Charlie’s stomach did a flip. He could hardly believe what she’d said, and he was so happy to know that she felt this way. If Lady Pippa really thought so well of him, everything in his world was suddenly that much brighter. It was exactly as he had always hoped it would be.

“Anyway, you may think I am foolish, and I would agree. But how could I call the constable on a man who had so recently made me happier than I have been in a very long time? It seemed impossible. So, I refrained. And as long as you are the man you seem to be, I shall continue to refrain,” she said.

The vow warmed Charlie’s heart. He knew that it cost her much to make such a statement. She was putting herself at risk by trusting him and that made him more determined than ever to protect her. He would protect her heart. He would protect everything about her.

And he would fight for the chance to make her happy.

## Chapter 15

Pippa was amazed to find that Charlie really was a good, kind man. She had been frightened by him for many reasons but now realised he was just a decent man making every effort to take care of himself—and to fall in love.

She wondered why he was doing so much on her behalf. It still made little sense to her that he would care so deeply for her and put himself at risk without even really knowing her, but Pippa wanted to know him better so she could understand. He was gentle and did not appear to be any kind of a threat.

Indeed, she knew that it was the right thing to be cautious, but she also felt no real suspicion against him. He was so calm and easy to speak with; how could she keep her guard ready?

As she considered the qualities she liked about him, and as he shared about his family and his life, Pippa knew without a doubt that this was the sort of man she would want for a husband. He was everything she might have considered worthy in a man.

And yet, she knew her mother would never allow it. There was nothing about him that would allow her to consider him a prospect for marriage. He had no wealth, no title. He was a musician and almost certainly had little to his name, as he had said. He played music at the parties where she and her family were allowed to dance, and he had no distant relations who had done anything grand, as far as she knew.

Well, she found their history to be quite grand, but her mother certainly would not.

“Are you all right?” Charlie asked her.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Forgive me. I think I was lost for a moment,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“Have I done something? Have I said something wrong?” he asked.

“No, not at all. I was only thinking about my mother and how angry she would be to find me out here. I want to be sure that you are safe and that I am not putting you at any sort of risk,” she told him.

“I am the one who has put myself at risk. You have no reason even to consider it,” he said.

“That is kind of you to say, and I appreciate that you would deem yourself responsible for it, but I still know what my family is like and what would happen to you if you were found out. By inviting you here this evening, I put you in jeopardy, and that is very much my own fault. You do not deserve it,” she said.

“I am glad you invited me here,” he insisted. “I thought you would never want to see me again after what I have done. But when you left me that note, something in my heart surged, and I wanted only the chance to tell you that I truly am inspired by you.”

“I find you to be rather inspiring as well. In many ways, I do not think I ever imagined I would meet someone who had such a bright view of

life, someone who would be so similar to what I have always hoped for in a ... friend,” she said, catching herself before admitting to where her thoughts had begun to stray.

Although neither of them spoke outright about their desire for a romance to develop between them, Pippa understood that it was the very intention they each had.

“Yes, of course. It is good to have a nice friend,” he said.

“Indeed ...” she replied.

They were both quiet for a moment, and Pippa considered what they had just nearly admitted aloud. She believed with all her heart that Charlie felt the same. After all, why else would he have come to her window like that? But she still knew very little about him and thought it was madness to allow her heart to grow towards him. There was no reason to let herself do something so foolish when she was just a young woman who knew so little of the world.

“Lady Pippa, I hope you do not mind if I continue writing for you. While I know that it would be wrong for me to come to your window—not to mention rather dangerous—I should like your permission to continue writing music that is inspired by you,” he said.

Pippa’s heart leapt at the request, and she felt a wave of flattery and excitement. Of course, she wanted him to write more in her honour. It was something any woman might want. But how would she hear it all? How would she know what he had put to music if he did not leave it for her?

“You may,” she replied. “But only so long as you promise always to get me a copy of the sheet music.”

“And how would you like me to do that?”

“I would like to meet you out here again. Perhaps, if you come, you may place a white ribbon in one of the trees. Be sure to do it after dark and only if you see no one coming. If I see the ribbon, I shall come out to you as soon as I am able,” she said.

It was a silly thing to suggest, but it came to her mind immediately.

“I would be very happy to do so. Of course, it does mean I must go into town tomorrow for a ribbon,” he said with a laugh.

Pippa smiled, pulled her single braid forward, and untied the white ribbon at its base.

“Actually, I think you will not need to do so. Here. You may take this,” she said, combing through her loose hair with her fingers.

Charlie stared at her in amazement, and Pippa immediately felt embarrassed. She looked away, feeling the heat in her cheeks.

“Thank you,” he said, awkwardly, clearing his throat and taking the ribbon from her.



“It is nothing. I am happy to help so that you need not bother to go and purchase one,” she said.

“When I finish my next piece of music, I shall be here just before dark, and I will wait. When I am sure no one can see me, I will tie it and expect you to look out the window before you go to bed. Then, I shall continue to wait until you can come,” he promised.

“I will feel very bad if you are kept waiting long,” Pippa said.

“I think I would be willing to wait an eternity if it meant that I would be able to speak with you,” he said.

She was humbled by that once more, amazed at how he managed to say everything so beautifully and with such ease. Pippa wished she could have that skill, that she could manage such poetry without even having to try. There was something so magnificent about Charlie and the way that he thought. She was starting to think that she would never again find a man who set her heart to racing like this.

She knew that her mother was intent upon a marriage with Lord Ganton, but Pippa could never marry a man with whom she did not feel this spark. Charlie was sweet and lovely in every way.

“I trust that you will tell me if you change your mind,” Charlie said.

“What do you mean?”

“If one evening, you come out here and tell me that I must stop, I promise I will listen,” he told her.

“Why would I want you to stop coming?” she asked.

Charlie took a deep breath and then shrugged, not meeting her eyes.

“I saw you dancing this evening. With Lord Ganton and others. I understand that a young woman cannot have midnight meetings with one man when she is married to another, and it is only a matter of time before you are married. Therefore, I shall abide by whatever restrictions you give me,” he said.

Pippa was grieved to hear that he was already giving up on anything happening between them. She tried to think of an appropriate way to say what was on her mind without being too forward about her feelings.

“If you will forgive me, Mr Thomas, I have no love for Lord Ganton. I met him only this evening, and while I know that my mother should like me to marry him, I felt that he was more of a friend than a husband,” she confessed, hoping Charlie understood what she meant by it.

“Please, do not call me Mr Thomas,” he said with a laugh.

“Is it not improper for me to so boldly call you Charlie?”

“Not at all. I prefer it,” he said.

“Then you must call me Pippa,” she replied.

“Ah, but you are a noblewoman. I cannot call you by your given name when you are a station far beyond mine,” he said.

“You may because I have granted you permission. And, as you said, I prefer it,” she told him, meaning it with all her heart. Particularly when it was Charlie who was speaking with her, Pippa preferred that he use her name. She did not want to be a noblewoman around him. She wanted only to be herself.

“Very well, Pippa,” he said.

“Thank you,” she replied, feeling a chilly wind even in there among the trees.

“Are you cold?” Charlie asked.

“Only a little. I am unbothered. I expect that it shall only get colder as the night goes on,” she said.

“It would seem that the night will not be going on much longer,” Charlie said.

Pippa didn't understand his meaning at first, but when she looked to the east and over the trees, she saw that the sky had already begun turning from black to a bruise.

"Oh, good heavens!" she exclaimed.

"You must return home with haste," Charlie said.

"How have we been out here so long? It felt as though it was only a short time," she said.

"It would seem that it has been hours," he replied.

They had walked slowly and stopped frequently, but Pippa knew it would still take her a good forty minutes or so to get home, even if she rushed as quickly as she could.

"I cannot allow them to catch me out like this," she said.

"Indeed, you must go. I shall leave the ribbon when I come to see you again," he promised.

"Goodbye, Charlie," Pippa said.

“Farewell, Pippa,” he replied.

With that, Pippa turned from him and ran as quickly as possible, darting for home. It was not easy, running along the path in her simple shoes, but she was determined that she would not be caught.

The night had been such a dream that Pippa would have given anything to stay out longer and spend more time with Charlie, but there was no chance for that. If her mother found out what she had done, her life would be thrown into further restriction than that which she was already under.

She reached the house as the sky began to brighten and saw the groom near the stables and a couple of the maids picking herbs from the garden. Pippa bolted as quickly as she could for the front doors, staying out of sight as best she was able.

As soon as she was up the stairs, she pulled the door open and ran straight into her mother.

“Pippa!” she gasped.

“M-Mother! You startled me,” Pippa said.

“Oh? And what are you doing out and about this early in the morning in your nightdress and a cloak?” her mother asked.

Pippa quickly regained her confidence, not wanting to draw any

suspicion from her mother.

“I woke hours ago and could not get back to sleep. I tried for such a long time, but eventually gave up and decided to go for a walk,” she said.

“You look exhausted,” her mother said.

“I am,” she replied, quite honestly.

“Very well, go up to your room and rest. I hope you are not getting ill,” she said.

“I am sure that I shall be fine, Mother. I was simply restless, but I think I am finally ready for more sleep,” she said.

With that, her mother moved out of the way and ushered Pippa upstairs. Relieved that her lie had been believed, and she would now have a chance for rest, Pippa went to her room and crawled under the blankets, truly exhausted beyond her imagining.

So much had happened since the ball the night before that her mind did not want to let her sleep, but Pippa’s body demanded it. And as she lay there, trapped in the place between waking and sleeping, she could not help asking the questions that she desperately wanted to avoid.

What did the future look like? Was she soon to be forced into a

marriage she didn't want, or would she find the freedom she needed to make her own choices? And what would happen to Charlie? Was he going to be able to come to see her again? Or would it be impossible, given the circumstances of their meetings and how secretive they would have to be?

Moreover, was she making a mistake? Was Charlie really the man she hoped he was? Was she right to trust him, or was he a madman after all?

## Chapter 16

Charlie and Joseph were making their way through town to visit some friends and play music together. He was excited for a chance to enjoy the company and indulge in something other than the sort of music they were always made to play at a ball.

“You actually went to her? And she wanted to see you?” Joseph asked in disbelief.

“I know you think it is impossible, but I assure you that she is not what you would expect from a woman of her station. She really does have a way about her that reminds me of my mother,” he said.

“Charlie, I hope you do not hate me for saying this, but you hardly remember your mother. Please, be reasonable. You do not know this woman, and it would be lunacy to think that you can actually have any sort of a relationship with her. She is a noblewoman,” Joseph reminded him.

“I am well aware of that, and so is she. Whatever comes from this, I am confident that she will at least be happy that we had the chance to spend time with one another,” he said.

“What will come from this is most assuredly a long drop and a short stop,” Joseph muttered under his breath, suggesting that Charlie would be hanged for this.

“Hardly! I have done nothing wrong,” Charlie said.



“Aside from stalking the daughter of a nobleman? Well, you may wish to reconsider what you think is acceptable,” Joseph said, quite reasonably.

Charlie didn’t want to think so negatively, although he understood that Joseph was likely right, but how could he give up this chance? He was desperate to spend more time with Lady Pippa and continue getting to know her. He was almost desperate to compose more pieces just to have another excuse to go and see her.

Indeed, the day before, he had begun working on another piece, just in the hopes that he might finish it in the next few days and go to her.

“Oh, dear,” Joseph said, stopping short as they walked along the sidewalk.

“What is it? We are already running late,” Charlie said.

Joseph raised his eyebrows and nodded up ahead for Charlie to see what had stopped Joseph.

When Charlie followed his friend’s gaze, he saw Lord Bregman standing outside a bank with Lord Ganton. They were clearly discussing something important, and Charlie was desperate to know what it was.

Although it mattered little to him, he was curious if there was

something important. More than likely, it was a discussion of trade or tea or spices. After all, those seemed to be the two things the men had in common.

Well, those and Pippa.

Charlie's skin went cold at the realisation they might be speaking of her. Was she the commodity they were trading? If so, he needed to inform her. Then again, why would he do that? What right did he have to warn her of something she may actually be happy about?

He thought about what she had said, how she thought Lord Ganton was a nice man, but not the sort she would ever want to marry. Was it true? Or was she just indulging an intrigue with Charlie while truly hoping to marry a man who could provide for her for the rest of her life? He could not fault her if that were the case.

"Charlie, you may wish to disappear before they see you. After all, Lord Bregman might recognise you as the man skulking around his property," Joseph said in a mildly irritated voice.

"Why must you say it that way? I have done no such thing. Just because I am fond of Pippa does not mean that I have skulked or stalked. And he has not seen me, so there is nothing to fear in that regard either," he said with determination.

"You are quite sure?"

"I am," he confirmed.

Joseph appeared less than convinced, but Charlie wasn't going to let his friend make him feel bad just because he was pursuing a romance that was utterly impossible.

"Well, as it is, I would like to pass by the two of them and see if I can glean anything from their conversation. Come, walk with me. We must go slowly, however," he said.

"What are you talking about? You wish me to be an accomplice?" Joseph scoffed.

"You may act as though you are judging me if that is what you wish, but I am no fool, Joseph. You are intrigued by the fact that I care for this woman, and you wish to know what will come of it. If you do want to know, you must come with me and hear what they are saying," he said.

"What do you expect they are saying?" Joseph asked.

"If I am fortunate, they are discussing matters of business and state. If I am not so fortunate? Well, perhaps they are discussing the very woman I have come to feel so strongly for," he said.

Joseph sighed and walked with him, slowly moseying as they went. It was not difficult, behaving nonchalantly as they walked. Many along the road were bustling about on their way somewhere, but others were taking their time, and Charlie hoped that he and Joseph simply blended in well with those men.

As they drew closer, Charlie inclined his ear to listen, hoping to catch as much of the conversation as possible without having to slow to a suspicious pace. If he were noticed, he would truly be in trouble.

At first, the words were sparse, based solely on how much other noise was around them.

“I should—is very lovely—would like to—”

Lord Ganton was speaking, but Charlie had to get a little bit closer before he could hear the sentences more clearly.

“And if you think that your daughter—be more than happy to consider—courtship, if you are pleased by it, Lord Breg—”

Charlie’s heart began to sink, but he was getting closer just in time to hear Lord Bregman’s reply.

“It would be my honour to have you court my daughter, and if she finds that she likes you, I would be thrilled by a proposal,” Lord Bregman said. “I did notice how she laughed when you danced together.”

Charlie clammed up, overwhelmed by the realisation that Joseph was utterly right. He had been a fool ever to think this would end differently than how it was now developing.

“Thank you, My Lord. You are—and she is—”

They were passing beyond where he could possibly hear anything more, and Charlie sighed with pain.

“I am sorry,” Joseph said under his breath.

“Are you? Did you not just tell me what a fool I was?” Charlie asked.

“I did, but as you said, there was also curiosity in my heart. Not simply because I thought this would fail, but because I hoped to see you happy. Although I knew that it was impossible that it could end the way you want, I still wished there would be a miracle, my friend,” Joseph said.

Charlie nodded, grateful that Joseph cared enough to have hope for him.

As they went along through the city, he had to admit to himself that he had been foolish to hope for anything different. Not only that, but he had known better. He had known better than to think that Lady Pippa would ever be his wife, that she could ever avoid a marriage outside of nobility.

And she had never promised him anything. In the few times they had met and spoken with one another, what reason had she given him to think that she would step aside from the life she lived? There was nothing about the society in which they existed that would give him the freedom to love her.

“Well, this is the life that I must accept. Until she is betrothed to him, I will continue as I have been doing, but I understand the cost of it, and I know that it will only end in my heartache,” Charlie said.

“Then why are you going to continue subjecting yourself to this? Would you not rather have the opportunity to find love with a woman you may spend your life with instead of trying to indulge in something that you know is not going to work?” Joseph asked.

“You have never been in love, Joseph,” Charlie said.

“Is that what this is? You love her already? Although you have only just met her and have spent only a handful of moments with her, you know that it is love?”

Charlie had to consider the question for a moment. Perhaps it really was ridiculous, but he felt certain that it was. He was confident that what he felt for Pippa had to be love. What else could it be?

“I do not know if this is love, but I do know that this is something I have never before experienced. That being said, it *must* be love. The poets speak of something so powerful, so dangerous, so incredible that it causes the heart to do wild and wondrous things. That is where my heart is at, Joseph. I feel wild and wondrous when I think of her,” he confessed.

“If that is so, then I suppose you must pursue her as best you can. If she prefers you over the nobleman, there is no reason to let her be pushed into a marriage with him. If the two of you care for one another, you have no choice but to give her your heart and ask for

hers in turn,” Joseph said.

“You see? Now you are speaking like a poet,” Charlie said with a smile, grateful that Joseph was at least giving him a small relief after the sadness he had just experienced.

“Well, I can hardly stand to see you this upset. If you are meant to spend your life with that woman, you have to go after her,” Joseph said.

“I do not know if it is what I am meant to do, but it is certainly what I hope for,” Charlie said.

“Then you know what must be done. You know that you have to make every effort,” Joseph said.

He was right. Charlie was determined to see if Pippa cared for him as much as he cared for her. If so, he wasn't going to risk the possibility of losing her just because her father was trying to arrange a match with another man. It would have to be her choice, no one else's.

Although his heart was aching, Charlie continued with Joseph and headed to see their friends. Once they arrived, they immediately began playing music together, enjoying the melodies that came from the instruments. The rhythms were fast and energetic, and many of the tunes were foreign. He appreciated that he was playing music with men from the east and far east, men from the north and the south. They were all indulging in the one thing they had in common.

Music was different in every nation, but it was still a language they all

spoke. It brought them together and unified them in a way that nothing else could.

This was a paltry balm for Joseph's weary heart, but it was a balm, nonetheless. He wanted to enjoy it and remember that Pippa had been fond of him because of this very thing. Just as he loved to perform these songs, she was happy to hear the ones he wrote for her.

As the evening began to wind down, Charlie sat at the piano once more after spending some time on the zither. He took out the song he had been working on since the previous day.

"I should like some input on this piece," he told his friends, all of whom agreed to offer their ideas.

At once, Charlie put his hands to the keys and started to play. It was a song that rose up with a call and response as he used music to ask Pippa his question.

*Do you care for me as I care for you?* the music asked.

*I called you here tonight, did I not?* it replied.

And there it was, the conversation from two nights previous. There, written as little dots upon a page, he asked her to be his wife.

And in his song, she said yes.



## Chapter 17

Pippa finished dressing for dinner and felt she looked her best. She knew how desperately her mother wanted this evening to go well, and Pippa was going to do whatever she could to make her mother proud, even though her heart was not in it.

Lord Ganton really was a nice man, but in the two times she had now met him, Pippa knew in her heart that he was simply not someone with whom she would ever fall in love. He was merely a kind gentleman with a good heart and clever humour. Still, she hoped she would not get his attention as she didn't want to hurt him if she could escape a marriage arrangement.

Were it not for Charlie, she might be willing to accept a proposal from Lord Ganton. He really was the most decent man she had met thus far in society. Although there would never be love for her part, she knew she could at least respect him.

But Charlie? Now she knew what it was to care for someone genuinely, to have affection and attraction, to connect with a man in a way that left her hoping for a future. It would be impossible for them to be together, but she had never wanted to live in a world where miracles did not occur.

Pippa thought it would be foolish to call it love so quickly, but what else was she meant to call it? When she thought about it as she lay in bed at night, she knew that had to be it.

The past three nights, she had not seen Charlie. She wished she had told him he did not need to bring music as an excuse to come to her.

She would be happy to see him no matter what. Any excuse was enough. But she had been a fool and had said to come if he had a composition, and that meant she would not get to see him very often.

Pippa heard the sound of a coach from outside her window and peered out to see Lord Ganton was arriving. She quickly made her way down to the parlour and waited. Her mother entered and appeared perfectly demure and gentle.

“Now, dear, remember it is very important that you impress him. He would be the most perfect and advantageous match for you. I do not think he would even be bothered by how precocious you can be. It seems to me that he has quite a bit of humour, and while I see no use for that, I know that you disagree,” her mother said.

Pippa nodded.

“Yes, Mother,” she said.

“Very well. Now, let us be ready for him.”

Pippa listened as the door opened, and her father greeted Lord Ganton. They came to the parlour together, and Pippa and her mother stood to curtsy and greet him.

“Lord Ganton, how nice to see you,” Pippa said.

“And you, Lady Pippa,” he replied with a sweeping bow.

When he came back up, he smiled mischievously at her to show that the grandness of his bow was meant only as a show for her mother's sake, and Pippa tried not to laugh. She appreciated that his wit was clever rather than crass.

“Lord Ganton, what a gentleman you are,” her mother said, ushering him to the chaise.

He sat and looked thoroughly uncomfortable as Pippa's mother fawned all over him.

The maid brought in tea, and Pippa's father struck up a conversation about trade and imports.

“Well, so long as the sea cooperates, I think we stand a fair chance of success, but I am sure that you heard about the loss of Mr Mayhew's ship last week,” Lord Ganton said in response to something Pippa's father had mentioned.

Pippa loved to hear about the far-off lands they traded with, but she cared nothing for the business aspect. Her mother was practically falling asleep and would occasionally take a sip of her tea, which Pippa noted was merely an attempt to stay alert.

“Gentlemen, we mustn't spend the whole evening discussing business,” her mother finally said.

“Quite right, Lady Bregman. You must forgive me,” Lord Ganton said. “Shall we instead be like the proper British folk we are and speak only of weather and balls?”

“Well, it has been unseasonably cold of late, so I suppose that is worth noting,” Pippa’s mother said.

Unable to contain himself, Pippa’s father burst out laughing at his wife’s inability to understand sarcasm. Lord Ganton pinched his lips together and was clearly holding back a laugh. As for Pippa, she could not help it when a single laugh escaped her lips before she followed Lord Ganton’s example for her mother’s sake.

“What is it? What have I done wrong?” her mother asked, red in the face with embarrassment.

“You have done nothing wrong, Lady Bregman. The fault is mine. I fear that I unintentionally set you up to be the joke, and it was not funny. You must understand this was never my intention,” he said gently.

“Worry not, Lord Ganton. My wife does not understand humour, irony, or sarcasm. She is every bit the ideal British lady, but she has never had occasion to be witty,” Pippa’s father said.

Although Pippa would have considered this an insult, she knew that her mother did not. After all, her mother was not stupid or foolish. She was simply a woman focused on status and the demands of society. She had been raised to be so prim and proper that laughter had been bred out of her. All Pippa knew of her mother’s upbringing was strictness and the demand that one day, she would marry a man worth every penny due her.

“I feel that I ought to be embarrassed, but I cannot say why,” her mother said, pitifully.

“Please, Mother, you must not get upset. It was not your fault,” Pippa said softly, placing a hand over her mother’s.

But Pippa’s mother flinched from the gesture. She had never been a warm woman and Pippa understood that this, too, had been a matter of how she was raised. Her mother and father had been rather cold, Pippa suspected. It had always grieved her to know this, but she still hoped for a happier future for her mother.

“Perhaps we ought to discuss something that we are all in agreement with,” Pippa’s mother suggested.

“And what is that, my dear?” her father asked.

“Marriage,” her mother said with a simple smile.

The room fell silent, and Pippa’s heart dropped. How could her mother bring up marriage like this? Lord Ganton had barely begun courting Pippa, and it was not the time to jump at something like this. Pippa still needed the chance to figure out what she wanted most. But this?

She glanced at Lord Ganton, whose eyes were wide with shock, and his lips parted as if in a silent gasp.

“My dear, I do not think now is the time for this discussion. Perhaps in a month or so,” Pippa’s father said.

“But why? We all know that marriage is where these dinners are headed,” she replied.

“This is only the second dinner, my dear. And I am sure other families have also requested the presence of Lord Ganton. Families with daughters, much like ours,” Pippa’s father said through a terse smile.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Bregman, but while I do have intentions of courting your daughter and I have spoken with your husband, I should like to get to know Lady Pippa before we discuss marriage,” Lord Ganton said with an uncomfortable expression of his own. It appeared that he was trying to smile but felt pain as he did so.

“Yes, Mother. Please. It is not the time for this just yet,” Pippa said, wishing the floor would swallow her up so that she might disappear.

“Very well,” her mother said, quietly defeated.

“Perhaps we ought to call for the maid and see if dinner is nearly ready?” Pippa’s father suggested.

“That is a wonderful idea, Lord Bregman,” Lord Ganton said.

With that, Pippa's father rang the little bell on the table, and the maid came running into the room.

"Slow down, Miss Elliot," Pippa's mother scolded.

"Yes, mum. Forgive me. You rang?"

"Miss Elliot, would you please see if dinner is served?" Pippa's father asked.

"Yes, My Lord," she replied before quickly leaving the room.

All was quiet, and Pippa looked up, briefly making awkward eye contact with Lord Ganton, who shared the forced smile they were all wearing.

A moment later, the maid returned, this time at a reasonable pace.

"It would seem that dinner is ready," she said.

Pippa could tell that dinner had not been ready a moment ago, but that the kitchen staff must be scurrying to get it ready now that her mother and father had requested it. Pippa followed her parents with Lord Ganton in tow, and they entered the dining hall in the same silence as they had experienced in the parlour.

Once they were all seated, Pippa's father picked up the conversation again, discussing more about trade and different types of spice.

"Ah, yes, the Abyssinian berbere pepper is exquisite," Lord Ganton said.

"Have you visited?" Pippa's father asked.

"Indeed, I have. A lovely country with beautiful people. They are hospitable in every way, and you cannot imagine the coffee. They roast it over a fire in little tin pans and bring it to you that you may inhale the smoke. They then grind it all in front of you and make it in a large clay pot," he said.

"It sounds magical," Pippa said dreamily. She tried to picture the setting but found that she could not. Deep inside, she yearned to explore these places. All her life, she had been curious about other countries, but never so much as these days, as she learned about different music and new flavours, things she had never thought of before, things outside of her small, British realm.

"It truly is. And they make the coffee so strong you feel like you could pull an ox once you have had it," he added with a laugh.

"I should like to try it. And the—what was the pepper you mentioned?" Pippa's father asked.

"Berbere. There is a pepper they use and grind with other spices for the powder. They have many flavours, vastly different from our



English ones. Anyway, that was one of my favourite places to visit. I have also enjoyed China and India. But, of course, there are many men you may speak with who have gone to those places and who appreciate them,” he said.

“Well, I shall be sure to do what I can to visit some of the other kingdoms you have been to. They sound awfully exciting,” Pippa’s father said.

“Indeed, they are. Perhaps, one day, we might have the chance to go to them. Until then, however, you should really try some of the spices we bring here. I know that you are a man of great tea, but you have not ventured into spice as our company has, and I would like to give you a chance to try some new things,” Lord Ganton said.

Although it was true that Pippa cared little for the business aspect, she still felt dreamy when imagining all the places in the world she wanted to go. Wondering if she would ever have a chance to visit them, she realised that Lord Ganton would be an ideal husband to take her. After all, he clearly knew about all these foreign lands, and he already had places he liked. She would have a place to stay if he went, thanks to his business.

But could she concede to marry a man purely because of the opportunities it might afford her? Would she not rather marry a man only because of love?

Pippa knew in her heart that love was more important to her than travelling. She would rather marry a man for whom she cared deeply than marry a man who would take her around the world. Wherever she might be able to go with Lord Ganton, it did not compare with staying right here and having a conversation with Charlie in the woods at night.

Indeed, Pippa knew her heart well enough to understand what she wanted, and she wanted to pursue a courtship with Charlie, even if her mother and father were unaware of it. Her only concern now was how she might be able to contact him. Would he be willing to come soon? Or would she have to wait for an eternity?

Once the dinner concluded, they had tea once more, and at last, Lord Ganton made his departure for the night. He had been a perfectly pleasant guest, but still, Pippa knew he was not the man she wanted to marry.

However, as soon as he was gone, her mother turned on Pippa and her father.

“How dare you? You humiliated me!” she shouted.

“Darling, please! Show some decorum,” her father insisted.

“How? You showed me so little regard. All I was doing was attempting to secure a match for our daughter. Do you not care about that? Does it not matter to you that we must hurry up and marry her off before it is too late?” her mother asked.

“Too late? Too late for what? Pippa is still young, and there is time to find her a husband. Lord Ganton approached me and expressed his interest, but he is not yet ready to propose. He wants to know Pippa first, to ensure that he likes her. You must give him a moment to think about it, my dear,” Pippa’s father said.

“While I give him a moment, another mother may come and sweep him away for her own daughter. If you truly care about our Pippa, you will not allow her to miss out on the chance of marrying him,” Pippa’s mother said.

“It is important that we give them time to know one another, that is all,” Pippa’s father said.

But her mother showed great exasperation and stormed off in a huff, unwilling to listen any further.

Pippa understood that her father had regrets about not taking time to get to know her mother, and she also knew that her mother would regret these actions later. Nevertheless, she felt the weight of her family’s arguments, wondering how she might make it better.

For the moment, there was very little she could do. Instead, Pippa made her way to her room and looked out the window, hoping for a white ribbon.

## Chapter 18

Charlie waited by the trees, the dark of night falling around him. He saw the glow of a candle from Pippa's room and then a silhouette in her window. A moment later, the candle drew closer to the window, and he saw what looked to be a white ribbon being held by a figure.

It was hard to make out, but he expected this was Pippa's sign that she saw his signal and would come to him when she was able.

Charlie had brought a light blanket in his satchel, just in case it was colder this evening, as it seemed it would be. He had bundled up well and was eager to see Pippa, but he had to wait nearly an hour before she came out.

As she approached, he watched her. She appeared cautious and tense, as though something was wrong.

"Are you all right? You came earlier than I anticipated. I have not even seen your father come out for his walk," Charlie said.

"He will not come this evening," she said, a sad tone in her voice.

"Is everything all right? Has something happened to him?" Charlie asked.

"Only an argument with my mother. It happens often, I am afraid.

Still, I feel awful that he was unable to enjoy his usual time outside,” she said.

Pippa seemed desperately unhappy, and Charlie wanted to understand what was going on in that beautiful mind of hers. Still, he did not wish to push or force her to tell him. Instead, he remained calm and peaceful as best he could, waiting to see if she would divulge anything further.

“It was a difficult evening,” she said.

“I am sorry. I wish that you had not had to face it alone,” Charlie said.

“It is quite all right,” she said as they slowly began walking away from the estate.

For a long moment, they were quiet, but Charlie sensed that she wanted to tell him something, so he didn’t try to speak over her.

“Lord Ganton came to dinner this evening,” she said, causing his heart to stop for a moment before it began to race.

“I see,” he said.

“I wish that I could say it was an easy night, that I simply told him I do not love him, and that was all,” she continued.

Charlie feared that she was about to tell him the worst news he could think of. Was she going to marry Lord Ganton? It appeared that she was trying to get around to saying as much.

“My mother desperately wants me to marry him and spoke up about it in front of him. We met him that evening at the ball when I realised who you were for the first time. Since then, I spoke with him at a dinner party once, and then he came here this evening. I wish that my mother was not trying to force this when it is something so important as my entire future, but she seems determined to make this decision for me,” she said.

“I understand. I cannot imagine how difficult that must be for you. What do you think of Lord Ganton?” he asked cautiously.

“As I said, he is a very good man. I have no romantic interest in him, but I can understand many qualities that would make him a good husband. Still, I do not think I would ever want to be his wife. What grieved me is the awareness that ... that I might never be allowed to marry the sort of man I would like to,” she said.

Charlie looked at her in a hurry, knowing precisely what she was saying underneath her words. It seemed that she was expressing feelings for him in turn, and Charlie wondered if this was the right time for him to say anything about how much he cared for her.

“Anyway, all of that was rather difficult. My father was upset with her for how desperate she was to discuss it, and then she was angry at us both for not supporting her decision to speak about it directly with Lord Ganton. In truth, I hope that this incident makes Lord Ganton more hesitant about pursuing a courtship and engagement because I do not wish to be his wife, but I am unsure how to tell him that,” she said.

“You would be so bold as to tell him you do not want to marry him?” Charlie asked, curious.

“Indeed, I would. The fact of the matter is that I do not wish to hurt him. He really is such a good man; I shouldn’t like to break his heart. I only want him to know that I would rather not marry him, that is all,” she said.

“I see. Well, if that be the case, you must be honest with him,” Charlie said, although he knew that part of it was for his own selfish motives.

He and Pippa continued to walk for a while, trying to do a better job of noting how the sky changed now and then. They didn’t want to be caught so far from the estate as they had been the previous time when light dawned. He also knew that she would be exhausted the next day, as would he, but Pippa was unlikely to have the chance for any extra sleep as he would.

Still, they continued to talk, unable to part from one another. Charlie knew that he ought to do the right thing and suggest that she return home and get some sleep, but he simply didn’t want her to go.

“We ought to turn around. It is better if we are near the house before the sun threatens us,” Charlie suggested.

“Yes, I suppose you are right. Still, I would rather wander further. That is one thing I have realised of late, how desperate I am to see other parts of the world than simply England. I envy your father for his travels,” she said.

Charlie had envied his father as well. He wished that he could jump onto a ship and set sail, visiting far-off destinations.

“Well, that is something we have in common. I am sure that Lord Ganton would give you the opportunity,” he said, wishing he didn’t have to remind her of that.

“I know, but I would not want to see those places with Lord Ganton. I would want to travel with someone I truly loved,” she said.

Charlie nodded. He had always wanted the very same thing.

“Would you want to go and live elsewhere?” he asked, curious what she might think of that.

“I think not. I would always long for the comforts of home. I just find myself often imagining the chance to explore for a month or so and then come back to my own bed. Then, perhaps six months or a year later, I would go and explore another place,” she said.

Charlie smiled in relief. He had never wanted to move away from England either. He loved his home country, even if there were things he would like to change about it.

“Well, if ever you do have the chance to travel, you must do whatever you can to listen to the music in those places and indulge in it,” he said.



“I promise that I shall, but you have forgotten what I said,” Pippa told him.

“Oh? What did I forget?” he asked.

“I told you that I would only travel with a man that I love ...”

Charlie’s heart quickened, and he turned to her. But rather than confirming or denying her meaning, Pippa simply grinned at him and continued walking forward, letting her words hang in the air for him to interpret as he pleased.

He made a very quick interpretation, indeed.

“Oh, I nearly forgot,” he said once he caught up to her. Charlie quickly opened the satchel and pulled out the composition. The air was not too cold, and he ignored the blanket, but it had at least kept the sheet music in place, and now, he was able to hand it to Pippa.

“You wrote me another piece?” she asked.

“Of course, I did. And I have also included the one I played for you at the ball since you did not have a copy of that one,” he said.

Pippa looked at the pages in the moonlight, but there was not enough

light with the trees still overhead.

“I shall play it later today,” she said. “And I also wished to tell you that you do not need to have sheet music if you wish to see me. No matter what the reason might be, simply place the ribbon in the tree, and I shall come,” she said.

“I fear I cannot do that,” he told her, looking down sadly.

“Oh ... of course. I understand,” Pippa replied apologetically.

“No, it is not that I do not wish to. What I mean is that I would be here every night. Both of us need to sleep at some point, and that would mean that I have to temper my visits. Perhaps I may come every few nights, but I should not stay as long as I did last time or this. You must get some rest,” he said.

Pippa nodded, clearly disappointed.

“I know that you are right. Still, I wish you were not. I do not like thinking that I have to be patient or that I must wait to see you. I would far rather spend time with you whenever I wish,” she said.

“As would I. But since we may only see one another at night, I suppose this is how it must be,” Charlie said.

“Yes. For now, you are right,” she sighed.

They continued along the path, and Charlie grieved that the day was fast approaching. Already, the home was in view, and the sky was turning to that purple colour that threatened morning. He knew they would need to be quick if Pippa was going to get inside and to her room.

Charlie also hoped that she would be able to sleep for two or three hours before her mother sent a maid to wake her. If she could get some rest, he would not feel so bad about this.

“Are you going to manage any sleep?” he asked her.

“Perhaps. I know that my mother wishes to take me for a luncheon with some of the ladies, but I shall do my best to get out of it or get through it,” she said.

“I wish I had not kept you out this long,” he said with regret.

“Please, do not feel bad. I am glad to have seen you,” Pippa said. “It was the best part of my day by far.”

“Well, I must say that it was the best part of mine as well,” he said.

“Then we have nothing to regret. Now, it seems that we are nearly there, and I fear that it means I must say farewell,” Pippa said, turning and looking at him.

Indeed, the path was beginning to open up, and Pippa quickly rushed to grab the ribbon and brought it back to him. It was better that she be seen than him.

“Thank you,” Charlie said.

“And thank you. You helped me ever so much this evening. I was quite sad, and now I have peace,” she said.

“That makes me happier than you could possibly know.”

For a long moment, Charlie gazed into her eyes, and she looked up at him with what he thought was hope and admiration. Perhaps he was a fool for loving her, but he was happy to be a fool if it meant this.

He was certain this was the ideal moment to kiss her, but he started by simply taking her hand in his. She gave it willingly, and Charlie felt the soft, smoothness of her hand in his own. He marvelled at it, although he could not tear his eyes from hers.

At last, he started to lean forward, ready to kiss her and she did not back away.

“Here, boys! Hurry up!”

Charlie pulled back, and Pippa did the same. They let go of one another’s hands in the shock, and Charlie looked to see that it was the

groom, calling for two footmen to follow him.

“You must go at once. Run,” Pippa urged him.

Charlie wasn't sure why he had to run, but he was not going to argue with her.

Without another word, he turned and took off, full speed ahead. He did not take the main path through the trees but rather charted a course of his own that took him out to the main road.

It had been a wise thing because, just moments after he had made it and was walking nonchalantly along the road, a coach passed him by.

In the coach were the groom and the footmen. They would have seen him had he not run when Pippa told him to.

Although his heart raced from anxiety when he realised how close he had come to being caught, Charlie was still full of joy. He'd had another night with Pippa, another chance to spend time with her. And she had made it clear that she felt something strong for him in return.

He truly did love her, more than he had ever imagined. And whatever happened in the days to come, no one could take that away from him.

## Chapter 19

Pippa was struggling. She could hardly keep her eyes open. As the day passed along, she made every effort but was finding it difficult to pay attention as the ladies discussed something about a woman who had been caught eating cheese made by the young man she'd loved in her youth and how her husband thought she was having an affair.

It was utterly ridiculous to Pippa, but she had also missed many of the details in her efforts not to sleep through the entire lunch altogether.

At one point, when her head was beginning to droop, her mother kicked her under the table, and Pippa looked up and smiled broadly. She noted how sombre the other women looked, and her mother said, more to Pippa than anyone else, "I am so very sorry, Lady Mervel. It is very sad that your parakeet died."

Pippa removed her grin at once and hoped that none of the ladies had noticed before it was too late.

After begging her mother to let her sleep longer, claiming she had not slept well in the night, her mother insisted she get up and get ready. No matter how much Pippa protested, her mother was unwilling to listen. It was time to go and meet the ladies for the luncheon, and Pippa could not get out of it no matter what.

Thus, she had made herself ready and went along to meet them. It was a painful afternoon, trying to pretend that she cared about anything they said, but the ladies did not appear to notice her indifference. They were so caught up in whatever drama or scandal they shared that Pippa might as well not have come at all.

Finally, her mother spoke up on something that forced Pippa to get involved in the conversation.

“Well, my daughter has caught the eye of the illustrious Lord Ganton, and we are now very busy trying to move things forward,” she said.

“Mother,” Pippa said in a panic as the women launched questions at her.

“Oh! How wonderful!”

“When did he propose?”

“What will you wear?”

“Is he going to take you off to some grand place to live?”

Pippa did not know how to answer, but she didn’t need to. Her mother explained that the proposal was forthcoming, but Lord Ganton had already secured her husband’s permission. She shared that Pippa would wear the finest silk, possibly something brought from abroad. And she assured them all that Pippa would remain in England, although they would likely travel now and again. But she said that Pippa, being a young lady of proper breeding, would only travel through Europe and never to any of those strange places unfit for noblewomen.

Pippa glared at her mother for that comment, thinking it an appalling thing to say, but the conversation moved along quickly. Once the lunch finally came to an end and Pippa was in the coach with her mother, she had the chance to mention her humiliation.

“Mother, I wish you had not spoken of Lord Ganton. He may not propose. I do not know if I even like him,” she said.

“And I wish that you had not continually fallen asleep in the middle of our lunch and conversation. It was terribly rude, Pippa. The only way I could keep you awake was to bring up Lord Ganton and push you into speaking about him. And look! Did you see how they all admired you? I am sure you know that each one of those ladies will be thinking what a proper, excellent young woman you are for managing to find a match in a man like him,” she said by way of defence.

But Pippa was furious.

“Now, I do not know what is wrong with you,” her mother continued. “You keep falling asleep, and it is positively ridiculous. When we arrive at home, you need to do something that will keep you awake. You have been playing the pianoforte constantly of late. Perhaps that will help you remain awake.”

Pippa actually liked that idea, wanting to try the two new pieces that Charlie had given her. As soon as they made it inside, she went to the piano and pulled out the composition, playing the first with great hesitancy and caution as it was a difficult piece. Realising it would take a long time to practice, she decided to try the second piece.



It was much easier and flowed in a lovely manner, as though each phrase asked a question to which the next phrase replied. Some of the answers were less happy than others, but the piece ended with an enthusiastic response that made Pippa's heart soar.

She finished it to the sound of someone clapping behind her. Pippa yelled and turned around to see Elizabeth standing there.

"That was lovely," Elizabeth said.

"Oh, you frightened me! Thank you. I was just giving it a try," she said.

Elizabeth came to sit beside her, and she looked at the sheet music for a moment.

"Will you play it for me once more?"

Pippa nodded.

"Indeed, if you would like. I am still learning it," she said.

With that, Pippa began to play again, putting all her effort and heart into the piece. She made a few mistakes and, at one point, completely lost her place. But it took her only a moment to get back to where she meant to be and played further.

“You really are magnificent,” Elizabeth said.

“Thank you, but I am merely adequate. I should like to get better. And I do want to learn the harp. I know that you have tried to show me many times, and I always fail, but I still want to get better,” Pippa said.

“Why this sudden interest in music?” Elizabeth asked, looking at Pippa with a strange knowing.

“What do you mean? I have always loved music,” she answered.

“Yes, you have, but never to this extent. From what I recall, you played pianoforte because you knew that you must. You enjoyed it over other activities, to be sure, but it was not something of great passion for you. These days, I am never here when you are not playing or speaking about music,” Elizabeth noted.

“Hmm. I suppose I had not realised. Maybe I am simply in a stage of life where I find music to be more important than I ever did before,” she said.

“That is reasonable enough, but I was simply surprised to see you throwing yourself into it to such an extent. Anyway, I do like the piece. I have never heard it before. Did you write it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Of course not. If I am merely adequate at playing, then you must know that I cannot compose,” she said with a laugh.

Again, Elizabeth looked at her with that strange and uncomfortable glance, as if she could see through Pippa somehow.

“What is it?” Pippa asked.

“There is something different about you,” Elizabeth said.

“Whatever do you mean? There is nothing different about me,” Pippa insisted.

“I cannot quite place it, but I have seen something change. Is it Lord Ganton? Is he the reason you are glowing? Is he fond of music, and you are trying to get better for his sake?” Elizabeth asked.

“No,” Pippa replied, looking down and not wanting to discuss it.

“Pippa, I am sorry. Have I said something wrong?” she asked.

“No, you have not. It is just that ... I do not love Lord Ganton, and I wish that everyone would stop making the assumption that I do,” she said.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and nodded with disappointment.

“I understand. I did not know that you felt that way. Your father seems to think you like him enough and that you are all right with the potential marriage, but that you do not want it as soon as your mother does,” Elizabeth said.

“Is that what he told you?” Pippa asked.

“Indeed. But if you do not wish to marry Lord Ganton, simply tell your father. He will put an end to this,” she said.

“It is not so simple. You did not hear how he and Mother argue about it,” Pippa said.

“I am sure she would be furious, but your father needs to stop catering to her demands like this. I am sorry, Pippa, you know that I love you dearly, but your mother ... she needs to be reminded that she is not merely a lady of society, but she is a *lady*. She is a woman who needs the same gentility in the home as she uses for a facade in public,” Elizabeth said.

“I know. I take no offence to it. The way she treats Father sometimes ...” Pippa trailed off.

“May I tell you something you will not hear from anyone else?” Elizabeth asked.

“Of course,” Pippa replied, intrigued.

Elizabeth leaned in and glanced around to make certain they were alone.

“Your father had liked another young woman before your mother. I do not know that it was love, necessarily, but he did care for her. She was quickly scooped up and married another man. Then, your mother came along. Our mother and father insisted that he marry her. He tried very hard to like her but found her to be too much of society’s ideal woman. She gossiped a terrible amount,” Elizabeth said.

While Pippa was shocked to learn that her father had cared for another woman, she was unsurprised about her mother and the things Elizabeth was saying now.

“Anyway, he was desperate not to marry her until, one day, he found her crying in the gardens,” Elizabeth said. This, indeed, was much to Pippa’s surprise. She could not imagine her mother being so vulnerable.

“She was out there, struggling with the knowledge that she was soon to marry my brother, your father. They spoke, and she shared with him that she was unsure she would ever be a good wife. She told him that she did not understand love and that she had never felt it, not even from her own mother and father,” Elizabeth said.

“Anyway, that was the day he decided to marry her. He saw her vulnerability and, I suppose, a part of him cared for her because of it,” she concluded.

Pippa was stunned, never having imagined this or thought there had been even the faintest hint of affection between her mother and father.

“Your mother had committed to him that day that she would do her best to keep his status in society, that she would be the most respectable sort of woman. But I think her idea of what that meant differed greatly from his. She brought him respect in society but has shown him very little in the home, you see. I do believe that she wants to be a good woman; she was just never taught how. She was always scolded into shape,” Elizabeth explained.

This insight was undeniably helpful for Pippa. She’d never known this side of her mother and had never thought her father would feel the way Elizabeth was describing. It was strange to imagine the two of them as young people, trying to navigate love and marriage.

“Anyway, your mother believes that this is simply how things are done in society. I am telling you this not only so that you will give her a chance to grow and understand you, but also so that you are warned,” Elizabeth said.

“Warned? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that if you think there is another gentleman who might make you happy, someone you are frightened to tell your mother about, you need to be prepared for whatever might happen when she does learn the truth,” Elizabeth said, giving Pippa chills.

“I ... I ...” Pippa began, unable to finish her sentence.

“When I say this, Pippa, it is not to frighten you but to ensure that you are prepared. Because it is not a matter of *if* she learns the truth. It

will come out one day, and you cannot possibly predict how she will respond when she hears of it. That is why I want you to be ready to give an account if needed,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa chewed her lip and looked down.

“Now,” Elizabeth said in a brighter tone. “Will you play this piece for me again? After all, it is a very lovely tune. And I do believe I have never heard it anywhere but here. You must be very special to have stumbled upon such a rare find.”

And at that moment, Pippa knew that Elizabeth’s suspicions were dangerously close to the truth.

## Chapter 20

Charlie was excited to be playing at another ball with the quartet, particularly since Pippa had told him at their last meeting that she would be there. As he waited for her arrival, he thought about how exciting it was to have these moments with her in public, even if they could not speak or be seen together.

No matter what, Charlie did his best to ensure that he did not stare at her the whole night. He feared what might happen if he was caught. It was one thing for him to be caught staring at a noblewoman, but quite another if someone suspected that they might actually have something between them as they did.

When Pippa walked into the hall that evening, Charlie's heart leapt. Joseph cleared his throat beside Charlie, forcing him to look away.

"Please do not get us thrown out of this hall," Joseph said quietly.

Charlie raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips, giving a single nod of promise.

"You know that you will have to see her dance with men this evening," Joseph reminded him.

"That does not bother me. She has no choice, and I trust that, at the end of the night, it is me she will be thinking of. I know she has a position in society and must be respectable as such, but I also know that I am a strong enough man not to be hurt by it," he said,



wondering if that was really the truth. When he thought about it, the one man he didn't want her dancing with was Lord Ganton, and he was probably one of the men her mother would be most insistent about.

"I do not wish to see you hurt, Charlie. And on a night like this, when our work depends upon it, you need to be ready for whatever happens," Joseph said.

"I shall do my best. Still, please remember that while this is not easy for me, I know how important it is for us to play well. This is not the time for a man such as myself to get upset and ruin things for us all," Charlie said.

Joseph still looked worried, as though he feared Charlie would not manage to hold himself at bay when Pippa was dancing with others. It caused him to suddenly question his own ability, and he was beginning to wonder if Joseph was right. Could he really get through this without his heart breaking by the end of the night? Was he as strong a man as he hoped he was?

"Very well. We should begin the next song," Charlie said, trying to move on rather than dwell on his concerns.

The guests milled about and found their partners. When Charlie glanced up again and saw Pippa, she looked his way and smiled at him before her mother ushered her to speak with the hostess.

Watching her throughout the first few songs, Charlie was relieved that she danced with no one but her own father. At last, he had a moment to rest from the music, and Joseph leaned over to him.

“You must be cautious. I know that you love her, but we are surrounded by those who we must charm and beg to give us work opportunities. Do nothing that will cause us to get into trouble,” Joseph warned.

“I promise,” Charlie said.

“What are you two speaking about? You both look so intense,” Simon asked, joining them, followed by Nathan.

“It is nothing,” Charlie said.

“Are you hiding something from us?” Simon asked in frustration.

“Hush, lads,” Joseph said. “What we are discussing has nothing to do with either of you or the music we are playing this evening. It is simply a matter for Charlie.”

“Is it about the woman he keeps staring at?” Nathan asked in a hushed tone, leaning close.

Joseph tilted his head and glared at Charlie.

“You see? This is what I feared might happen. I did not want anyone to notice, and if my youngest brother is noticing, I can assure you that some of these noblemen will notice,” Joseph said.

“They do not even look at us. How can they notice me? I am behind the sheet music the entire time anyway,” Charlie defended.

“Nevertheless, be careful. I would feel awful if we were forced to remove you from the quartet because every man and woman in this room fears you will be after their daughter,” Joseph said.

“Lads!” Simon urged them in a harsh whisper, getting their attention.

The host was eyeing them suspiciously, and they all smiled and moved back into place, preparing for the next dance.

The evening was long, and Charlie was already exhausted, but it was when he saw Lord Ganton leading Pippa to the dance floor that he thought his heart might break.

He understood that she had no choice, that she needed to dance with Lord Ganton to keep up appearances and not draw any suspicion. He also knew that she had to appease her mother as long as she was able. Still, he wished that she would bring all this to an end sooner rather than later, that Lord Ganton would know she did not love him.

Charlie played to the best of his ability, focusing as hard as he could so that he didn’t make a mistake simply because he was upset and emotional. He feared letting his worries get in the way and causing trouble.

As he and his friends continued the song, he saw Pippa laughing at something more Lord Ganton said. There was something about that man that always made Pippa laugh. She did not laugh so much with Charlie. He wished that he could be more humorous.

Was he too serious all the time? Did he brood? Or was it just that he was constantly thinking about the future and rarely content with the present? Charlie wanted to have the same ability to be lighthearted and witty that Lord Ganton seemed to have if it meant giving Pippa a bit of joy.

Determined that he would try to be lighter and less gloomy, he put his full energy into the piece until it was finished and, at last, Pippa parted ways from Lord Ganton.

When she did so, she looked in Charlie's direction, and her smile faded to something far deeper and more intense. He wondered then if it was his fault she experienced sadness. Was it his fault that she was struggling to move forward? Was he holding her back from a life of laughter and adventure through exotic places and wondrous destinations?

He didn't know what any of this meant for him. All at once, he grew deeply insecure, and his hands began to shake. It would soon be time to start the next song, and he had to get hold of himself.

"Have you any water?" he asked Joseph.

"Did you finish yours?"

“I did,” he replied.

“Here,” Joseph said, handing it to him.

Charlie drank greedily, and Joseph got the attention of a maid, asking for more water for them both.

It did little to quell Charlie’s fears, but at least it gave him a moment to be distracted. He took a few deep breaths, hoping that no one noticed the sudden discomfort he felt. But when he looked up once more, he saw Pippa eyeing him with worry. No one else appeared to have seen him mercifully. But Pippa was watching, and he feared that she was upset.

A few moments later, she disappeared from the room. He needed to begin the next piece of music and did so, joining with his friends to bring the piece to life. It was a struggle, but he played it flawlessly and was pleased to have accomplished it even though he was feeling so overwhelmed.

By the end of the dance, Pippa had returned, slowly made her way near him, and dropped a piece of paper, just as she had the night of the ball nearly two weeks ago when she first asked him to meet her outside her home.

When he had a moment between songs, Charlie picked up the paper and read it.

*When you are able, meet me in the northwest parlour. There is no one there. If someone is when you go, head to the third room to the left and go*

*to the balcony.*

Charlie took a deep breath and smiled slightly, looking up and seeing Pippa watching him, waiting for confirmation. He gave a single nod to confirm that he understood and he would do what she had asked.

There were still a few more songs before he would have a lengthier break, and Charlie tried to get through them without any hesitation or mistake. Simply having the note from Pippa gave him such relief that he could play more freely and without the same insecurities he was having just moments before.

He was unaccustomed to those feelings, but there was just something about that night that had made him uncomfortable. He couldn't quite place it and didn't like knowing that he had this within himself, that he could be so upset over something so small. Despite knowing that Pippa had to dance with Lord Ganton and how important it was for her to do so, his grief was unbearable.

For the next few dances, he continually noted how Pippa smiled at him from afar, her eyes glittering in the light and the way she seemed to notice him at every moment. It reminded him that he had no reason to be so upset. Indeed, even if she had not cared for him, he had to see the world as something brighter than what it had been for him that evening.

When his chance for a break finally came, Joseph turned to him.

"You are meeting her, are you not?" Joseph asked.

Charlie nodded.

“Yes, that was my intention. She requested it,” he said.

“Please be careful. Remember that it is not only you whose career is dependent upon this but ours as well. I want to be able to provide for my family, and you cannot get into any trouble, or it will place our chances in jeopardy,” Joseph warned him.

“I know. I assure you that we shall be careful. It will only be a moment, and there will be nothing that cannot not be explained away. I may simply pretend that I bumped into her in the hall or that she was complimenting my skill or that she was asking about our ability to play at her wedding,” he said, listing off a few excuses he could give if he were seen speaking with her.

But Joseph gave him a blank stare, one that told Charlie that his friend was not convinced. Nevertheless, Charlie would go forward and find Pippa, to tell her that he did not want to be the sort of man who grieved when he saw her with another. With that, he stood from the piano bench and made his way towards the hall door.

Charlie went to the northwest section of the home, just as Pippa had instructed. He saw the door to the parlour open and glanced inside to see a nobleman and one of the maids locked in a gentle embrace. Aware that what he had just seen was quite the scandal, he quickly moved on, counting to the third door and seeing no one inside. He made his way through the room and closed the door before heading out to the balcony.

“Did you see them?” Pippa asked him with a giggle.

“Lord Something-or-Other and the maid? Indeed, I saw them,” Charlie said with a laugh of his own.

“He is unmarried, or I would have an obligation to tell someone. But, as it is, I am perfectly happy to let them do as they wish,” Pippa said.

“And us? What if we are spotted out here, alone? I told Joseph that I would find an excuse, that I would say you were complimenting my playing, but now that I am here with you, I cannot imagine anyone would believe such a thing,” he said.

“No, I do not think so either. I know we have only a few moments,” she said.

“And why is it you wanted to see me?”

“You looked terribly upset. I was not sure if it was because I danced with Lord Ganton or if I had done something else that upset you,” she said.

“You did nothing to upset me,” he assured her. “What upset me was ... oh, Pippa. I am not the man you think I am.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Charlie knew he had to admit how weak he was, that he was not as



strong as he pretended to be. But how? How could he tell her that he was a fool in love, like any other?

“I am weak,” he confessed. “And you are my greatest weakness.”

## Chapter 21

It had not been easy sneaking away from the hall again, but Pippa had noticed that something was terribly wrong with Charlie, and she needed to see him. Still, as she stood there with him, the last thing she'd expected was for him to tell her that he was weak.

"You are not weak," she insisted, incredulous that he should suggest such a thing. He was the strongest man she knew. He had been through so much with the loss of his parents and still managing to make something of himself despite being on his own. She was deeply impressed by him and thought she had never met a stronger man in all her life.

"I am," he replied. "You cannot imagine how weak I am. In so many ways. All I wanted for tonight was the chance to prove that I could be just fine when you danced with another man. Instead, I found myself feeling desperately hurt, wondering why I cannot make you laugh as he does."

Pippa looked at him in confusion and waited for an explanation. This made no sense. What was he trying to say? Was he jealous of Lord Ganton even though she had already told Charlie she didn't love that man?

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have seen the two of you together only a few times, but he always makes you laugh. I have never made you laugh like that," Charlie said. His voice was not self-pitying but rather apologetic. She gathered that he felt bad for never having given her a reason to laugh so much,

but how could she explain that Lord Ganton usually only made her laugh by mocking women just like her own mother? It was not overly charitable humour.

“And that is why you were so upset?”

She couldn't understand why this was so upsetting to Charlie, but she was eager to make sense of it.

“Yes, it was. Because you deserve a man who can charm you and make things light and simple. He can take you on adventures, but he can also bring you joy,” Charlie said.

“And you think those are the most important things to me?” she asked.

“Why would they not be? I can understand it, and I would not judge you for it,” he said.

“But, Charlie, those things matter very little. Shall I explain it to you?”

Pippa was surprised that Charlie was so upset about this. She hadn't thought he would feel this way, especially when she knew how much she cared for him, how much she loved him even.

Why didn't he understand that she meant it when she hinted at this? Did she need to tell him outright?

"I do not wish to be the sort of man who demands explanations from the woman he loves," Charlie said.

"But if it would help, I am more than happy to offer them. You see, Lord Ganton truly does make me laugh. He is very kind and very funny. I enjoy his humour and the fact that he often mocks society," she began. It seemed that Charlie was still hesitant to believe her, that he couldn't understand why she wouldn't be more interested in Lord Ganton even though Pippa had given Charlie no reason to think otherwise.

"But that is only a simple thing. I care about more than that. I care about a man with great character and someone who knows me. Someone who knows my heart. I care about someone who can connect with me and bring me peace and true joy.

"You said that he brings me joy, but you are mistaken," she continued. "He brings me *happiness*, yes. But joy? That is something else altogether. Joy is something that wells up from deep inside. Happiness may be set down upon a person, imparted to them. But joy? That is from the heart. Happiness is an emotion. Joy is a state of being."

Charlie looked at her as though he still wasn't sure how this affected him. At that point, Pippa knew she had to be bold. No matter the risk, she needed him to understand.

Pippa stepped closer and leaned into Charlie, feeling his hesitation as he wrapped his arms around her. At last, he settled into holding her, and she took a deep breath of peace as she was held. There had never been a more perfect feeling in all her life.

“This? This is joy,” she said. “This is a moment in which I am not feeling an emotion. I am in a state of pure bliss. And that is because of you, Charlie. That is because you are the man who has shown me who I am as a woman and what I mean in this world.”

For a long moment, Charlie was quiet, just standing there with her in his arms. But slowly, Pippa felt him begin to sway. And then, a quiet hum came from his throat as he sang the tune of one of the songs he had written for her. It was soft and gentle, but Pippa held onto the moment.

All around them, the air was quiet. A soft, gentle breeze passed by once, but nothing more. All the guests were inside, and the yard below the balcony was empty. Pippa felt as though the whole world and time had stopped to give them this moment together. She knew they had already stayed out here too long and that Charlie needed to go back inside and start playing music soon.

But she was in his arms, and that was all that mattered. She could not pry herself away from him and felt as though nothing would convince him to let go of her either.

They moved in that quiet motion, just the sound of Charlie’s hum to remind Pippa that she was still awake and this wasn’t just a blissful dream. He held the melody softly, not adding any drama or flare. He just hummed for her, and it was the most beautiful music she had ever heard.

But the moment had to come to an end, and she knew it. They had been out here for so long already, and someone was bound to notice at least one of them missing eventually. So when Charlie’s melody concluded, Pippa pulled back and sighed.

"I wish this did not have to end. You bring me such joy, Charlie. I want nothing more than to find a way for us ... to find our chance to be close, to be ... to be more than this," she said, hoping her words made sense to him.

Charlie nodded, and Pippa saw the sadness in his eyes. It made her heart ache to know they still had not spoken their feelings aloud but rather danced around them. They had made it so apparent that they loved one another but still had not said it. And what would come of it once they did?

Charlie likely worried that he couldn't say it because of Pippa's station. She, however, feared being the one to say it because she was a female and thought it was his duty to be the first to speak it aloud.

"I know that I was a fool to get so upset this evening. I am grateful that you have not judged me, although I certainly judge myself. I never knew that I was capable of being that sort of man," he said.

"What was it?" Pippa asked. "Was it jealousy? Were you angry that I was dancing with Lord Ganton?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head with certainty. "It was not jealousy or anger. It was me. It was the feeling of disappointment and the belief that I could never make you happy as he can. As I said, I do not make you laugh as he does, and I could not take you to wondrous places as he could. I suppose that bothers me."

"And I could never play music with you the way my aunt could. Shall I be upset, wondering if you would choose her over me? Shall I fear

that one day you would come to realise that she brings you more joy than I?" Pippa asked, challenging his train of thought.

Charlie laughed and shook his head again.

"You really do have a way of helping my perspective," he said with a sigh.

"I am just trying to make you see that you are the one I want," Pippa said.

She had never been in love before. She had never even imagined she would find love, not after seeing her mother and father for all these years. Elizabeth's marriage had given her hope, and she longed for love.

But this? How had she discovered this?

Pippa thought back to what Elizabeth had always told her. She should not go in search of love but wait for love to find her. That had certainly happened with Charlie. There was nothing about him that Pippa could have gone seeking out.

He was outside of her ability to discover on her own. But they had come upon one another under the strangest of circumstances, and now that she had found him, she knew the truth without a doubt.

She was in love.

“What is it?” Charlie asked. “You have something on your mind.”

“I have a great many things on my mind,” she admitted.

“I should like to hear them all,” he said.

“I wish that we could, but you must go back in. How long are you allowed to have a break for?” she asked.

“Twenty minutes. I know you’re right, it has likely been nearly that long by now, but I find that it is impossible to pull away from you,” he said.

“Then we must find a chance to meet again. Perhaps tomorrow evening?” Pippa asked.

Charlie thought for a moment before replying.

“I think it should work, but I meant what I said before. We cannot stay out so late. I do not wish you to get in trouble again. Your mother was upset before and, because of that, I need to be sure that you have enough sleep,” he said.

“Very well. You must come, but we shall spend only two or three hours together,” Pippa said.



“Yes, that is a perfect plan,” he said.

Pippa hoped she would manage to stretch the time just a little bit longer but wasn't sure if Charlie would allow it. He was so concerned about her, and she didn't want to make things worse.

For now, she knew he had to return, but of all the things she wanted to tell him, there was one that stood out in her mind. One thing that was of utmost importance.

She needed Charlie to know that she loved him. While she believed that he loved her as well, Pippa didn't need him to say it. She only needed to be the one to tell him first.

With that, Pippa took a deep breath.

“Charlie, I know we must leave, but before we go, just allow me to say this one thing,” she began nervously.

“You may say anything you want to me,” he replied.

“Very well, then. You have no reason to worry about Lord Ganton or any other man. Truly, Charlie. There is only one man I care for. I lo—”

The gasp at the door startled Pippa, and she jumped back but put her hand against the rail of the balcony to steady herself. Charlie backed

in the other direction and stared, wide-eyed with fear.

“Pippa?”

Pippa swallowed and took in a ragged, anxious breath.

“Elizabeth?”

## Chapter 22

As Elizabeth turned away in shock and left the balcony, Pippa ran after her. Charlie took the opportunity to slip away, and Pippa knew he was likely racing back to the pianoforte before anyone caught him for being gone so long.

“Elizabeth, wait,” Pippa urged, taking her aunt by the arm and holding her back before she could leave the room.

Elizabeth turned on her with wide, frightened eyes.

“Pippa, what am I meant to do? What were you thinking? Your father will be furious if he finds out, and you know as well as I do that, eventually, he is going to learn the truth,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa started to speak but stumbled before she could get any words out.

“I assure you that nothing improper has taken place. I mean, aside from what you have just seen, nothing has happened,” she promised.

“And what of it, Pippa? The very fact that you were alone with a man is improper, and the fact that you were dancing with a musician? You know as well as I do that such a thing would never be accepted by society,” Elizabeth reminded her.

“I know,” she said sadly. “But that does not mean that I can shut away how I feel about him.”

Elizabeth sighed in despair and looked down, closing her eyes for a moment as if frustrated beyond words.

“I never meant you to find out,” Pippa said.

“Precisely, Pippa. I do not know where to begin with you. First of all, you should know that people will always find out what it is you wish to keep hidden. Moreover, if you truly care about him, then you ought to be prepared to share about your love for him with others. Your mother and father shall have to learn the truth if you are to spend your life with him,” she reasoned.

“I know that. But we were not ready to speak of it,” Pippa said, trying to defend herself. She knew, however, that there was no real defence. She had made a grievous error in judgement. She ought to have figured out a better way to handle this.

“Nevertheless, I know about it now. You must realise the strange position in which I now find myself. How am I meant to keep this from your father? When he learns the truth, he shall be furious with me for not telling him,” Elizabeth said.

“Please, Elizabeth,” Pippa begged, taking another step towards her aunt and dearest friend. “You cannot tell him. Not yet. I will, but not until we find a way to convince him and my mother that we may be together.”

“And when is that going to be, Pippa? You shall never manage to convince your father—and especially not your mother—that you should pursue a match with a man like him. He is not noble, Pippa. You know as well as I do that marriage to a commoner is simply not allowed,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa took a step back, feeling suddenly betrayed. She had not expected this from Elizabeth. Certainly, Pippa had experienced more than enough from her family to know they might show prejudice against a man like Charlie. But Elizabeth? She had never been the sort to look down on others for their station.

“Pippa, I meant nothing by it,” Elizabeth said, defending herself.

“How can you say such a thing?” Pippa asked. “How could you act as though he is less than us because of his work?”

“I would have no qualms with the match, Pippa. I am sure that you know that. But your mother and father will not agree, and I have little doubt they would have his reputation ruined if you are not careful. He seems to be a nice man, and I recognise him from the symposium, but you cannot simply push aside everything that is expected of you,” Elizabeth reminded her.

“And what of your philosophy of love, Elizabeth? You told me not to seek it out. You said to wait until it finds me. Well, here I am. I have been found. I cannot pretend otherwise,” Pippa said, her heart heavy with the burden of her circumstance and the fact that even Elizabeth did not appear to understand.

But Elizabeth took a deep breath and released it with a sense of regret and shame.

“Pippa, I did not mean to upset you. Indeed, I hope that you will listen as I attempt to explain the distinction you are missing,” she began.

“I support you falling in love with whatever man catches your fancy. If it be this man, I heartily approve. But what troubles me is that you are hiding it. You know that your mother and father shall not feel as I do. Instead of confronting them and asking them to consider your request, you have snuck around in this,” Elizabeth said.

“What am I to do?” Pippa asked with tears in her eyes.

“You must find a way to be honest with them, to tell them what you hope for and about the fact that you have fallen in love with a man they would likely consider unfit for you to marry. It will be better for you if you tell them now rather than trying to wait until you can in the future. It shall do you no good to put it off, Pippa,” Elizabeth warned.

But Pippa could not imagine telling her mother and father. Not yet, anyway. She was still getting to know Charlie. Did she love him? She certainly thought so. But how could she convince her mother and father to allow her the chance to be courted by a man she barely knew? Particularly when he was not of the station they expected her to marry? The idea of telling them now seemed madness. She would have to wait.

However, she knew that Elizabeth was correct. If Pippa waited any longer, her mother and father would accuse Charlie of pushing for the inappropriate relationship. They would be furious to learn that Pippa had spent time with him behind their backs. They would never trust her nor forgive her for doing such a thing.

Pippa understood that her dilemma was fraught with challenges. There was no real way to make it all come together smoothly.

“I shall keep your secret, Pippa, but only for a short time,” Elizabeth offered.

“You will?” she asked, shocked by her aunt’s generosity.

“I am doing so only because I believe that it is important for you to find the right time and way to tell my brother about your romantic interest with ... what was his name?”

“Charlie. Charlie Thompson,” Pippa said.

“Thompson? Hmm. Are you quite sure it is not Thomas? I feel as though there was a musician at my party by the name of Charles Thomas, although I never met him that evening,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa blushed, embarrassed to admit that she did not even know Charlie well enough to be sure of his surname.

“Yes, of course, it is. Is that not what I said?” Pippa asked, attempting to deny her error.

“You said it was Thompson,” Elizabeth confirmed.

“Oh, forgive me. That was not what I meant,” Pippa remarked nonchalantly. She did her best to cover for her mistake, but it was clear that Elizabeth had not fallen for the act.

“Regardless, Pippa, you must do your very best to be sure that you find the right time to tell your father. And that time must be soon. I shall keep your secret for no more than a couple of weeks, although I would not be surprised if it comes to light much sooner,” Elizabeth said.

“How so? If I say nothing and you say nothing, how would he find out?” Pippa asked, incredulous.

“Because you were dancing on the balcony with him, and I happened upon you,” Elizabeth said. “You may just as well have been seen by a dozen others. And if you are not careful, a dozen more shall certainly spy you. I only hope that you are not in such a precarious pose when they do.”

Properly chastised, Pippa wished that Elizabeth would not be so hard on her. After all, they were very good friends in addition to being family. Elizabeth was the one Pippa always went to when she needed a word of advice. So what was she meant to do now?

Just as those thoughts crossed Pippa’s mind and she was irritated at Elizabeth, she also recognised that Elizabeth was merely trying to help her. How else was Pippa supposed to know what to do next? And what would be the consequence of being caught with Charlie by someone who would not be so kind as Elizabeth was? It would certainly be a dire circumstance if such a thing occurred.



Indeed, Pippa knew that Elizabeth was only doing what she could to protect Pippa. And if that protection came at the cost of Pippa having to make a difficult decision, that would simply have to be a part of the journey to overcoming society's expectations.

"Now, Pippa, we ought to return to the ball. I cannot bear to be caught in here with you and have anyone question our reasoning. You know as well as I do that if you are found out, there shall be a great and terrible consequence. Moreover, if I am found out for knowing and not reporting to your father at once, I shall be in grave trouble as well," Elizabeth said.

"Yes, I know. Thank you for risking so much to keep my secret. I shall discuss with Charlie, and we will find a way to tell Mother and Father. I promise," Pippa said.

"Very well. And now, you must go out there and dance with Lord Ganton. I fear that he quite likes you, and that is only going to cause you more trouble if you are slow to address your current interest," Elizabeth warned once more.

Pippa hung her head, knowing how right Elizabeth was. Still, she did have a small hope that Lord Ganton still had not made up his mind about her. Although he seemed interested in her, Pippa did not think he was anywhere near love. It seemed to her that he was still trying to figure out precisely what he thought of her.

Perhaps she was simply hoping for that because it would make things much easier, but she clung to the thought, nevertheless. It brought her a great deal of peace to imagine that he did not care for her nearly as much as she and Charlie cared for one another.

Without another thing to be said, Elizabeth turned from Pippa and departed from the room, leaving Pippa to catch up and follow along behind. There wasn't much reason to stay behind, wallowing in her lingering thoughts. Pippa simply wanted to return to the hall, ensure that Charlie was not in trouble but was simply performing again, and have a chance to flash him a smile and a nod that everything would be all right for the time being.

Yes, she had work to do. But the idea of convincing her mother and father that she ought to be courted by a man who was beneath their station was foolish. No matter how much hope Pippa had in that possibility, she understood that it was more than unlikely. It was impossible.

Still, as Pippa entered the hall and saw Charlie playing with a firm tension in his shoulders, she waited until he glanced up and she could smile as she'd intended. But even upon seeing her smile, he did not seem to be at ease. It was then that she noticed his friend glaring at her from above his violin.

Pippa turned away and ran straight into Lord Ganton's chest, taking a step back and immediately apologising.

"Forgive me, Lady Pippa," he said.

"It was my fault. I am so sorry," she replied in a hurry, blushing with embarrassment and wondering if Charlie saw her speaking with Lord Ganton now.

"I wanted to thank you for the dance," he said.

“Of course, Lord Ganton. It was my pleasure. Although I know that I am not the most graceful dancer here this evening, you are very kind,” Pippa said.

“On the contrary, I think you are a very fine dancer,” he replied.

“Not like Lady Anne. I am sure you have seen her?” Pippa asked, redirecting his attention to the lovely brunette who was gliding across the dance floor as if enchanted by magic.

Lord Ganton swallowed and blinked before looking back at Pippa as if he knew he should not be admiring the other woman.

“Ah, yes. Well, she is also a fine dancer. I have not met her before,” he said.

“Her family only just returned from a visit to Italy. They have been gone nearly two months, as far as I recall. Anyway, she is a very fine young woman,” Pippa said, although, in truth, she had never been fond of Lady Anne. Pippa was not so competitive, and Lady Anne seemed to consider Pippa something of an adversary.

“I see. Well, once more, Lady Pippa, I am grateful to you for the dance, and I wish you a pleasant evening,” he said, bowing and making his way for the refreshments.

Pippa was glad to have at least suggested Lord Ganton’s attention in

another direction. While it would not at once solve her struggles, she hoped it would relieve this one little burden.

And if she could relieve even one burden, it would make all the difference.

## Chapter 23

The evening had nearly come to an end, and Charlie was desperately relieved, hoping that he would be able to finish playing and leave the ball at once. He still had not figured out what he would do that night. Would he go to Pippa's home and leave the ribbon as usual? Or would he stay away for a few days out of fear that her aunt would tell Pippa's father?

As they played the final song, Joseph gave Charlie another of his warning looks, reminding him that there could never again be a repeat of what had happened that evening.

After returning to the hall, Charlie discovered that he had been gone nearly twice as long as he intended, and the guests were feeling restless. Joseph had only a moment before they began playing, just a moment for a harsh whisper that the host was furious and Joseph had told him that Charlie was unexpectedly ill.

The song concluded, and the guests petered out as Joseph and his brothers put their instruments away.

"If I had not told him you were ill, he would most assuredly have sent his servants to find another group to finish the evening," Joseph said.

"I am sorry. Truly. Something unexpected happened," Charlie said, afraid that Joseph would not forgive him.

"I care nothing about that. It would not have happened if you had

been responsible enough not to run off with her like that. Now, hurry up and gather your things. I shall have Simon collect our pay, and we will get you out of here at once,” Joseph said.

Charlie, knowing he had let his friends down, obeyed Joseph. He was not going to cower, but he understood that he needed to make amends for now.

Once they were all outside, waiting for a coach to take them home, Joseph was calmer and ready to discuss the matter further.

“Charlie, I know that you care about this woman, but you are being reckless. I fear that you are going to do something you gravely regret if you are not careful. You nearly got us sacked this evening, and if we had been, I cannot say that I would have defended you,” Joseph warned.

“I understand,” Charlie said, looking down in dismay. He truly did, although it grieved him to consider how that would have impacted their lives and friendship. He could never again have the opportunity to perform or play music if he lost his quartet. There were many other pianists out there they could choose from, and no other group would hire him if he gained such a poor reputation.

“I am relieved to hear it. I need you to think about what these opportunities mean for us. We are not simply playing behind you, Charlie. We are meant to play *together*. That requires equal footing. No man is more important than the others. And your affection for a noblewoman cannot get in our way,” Joseph said.

Charlie nodded. Just as a coach drew near and they were ready to climb in, someone cleared their throat behind Charlie. He turned and

was shocked to see Pippa's aunt standing there.

"Good evening, Mr Thomas. I do recall that you and your quartet played at a party I hosted a few weeks back. I wanted to thank you for your excellent musicianship," she said, narrowing her eyes slightly to warn him that she was only trying to cover for her real purpose in standing there.

"Oh, yes. Indeed, Lady Andrews. Thank you," he said, taking a bow.

Lady Andrews handed him a piece of paper and gave a final, terse smile.

"Very well. I bid you goodnight," she said, taking her leave.

Charlie quickly glanced around and, seeing that no one had noticed the brief encounter, he unfolded the paper and began to read.

*I have told my niece that I shall give you both two weeks to determine what is to happen next. For the moment, I shall remain silent. That is only for her own sake, not yours. Be wise in your next steps.*

Charlie swallowed his fear, shocked that Lady Andrews had agreed to this silence. Nevertheless, he wondered what the cost might be. She had said it was all for Pippa's sake, but Charlie was certain that her loyalty to her brother would inevitably push her to be honest with him.

“What did she give you?” Joseph asked, drawing near. He had pretended not to notice the interaction while Lady Andrews was there, but now his curiosity was piqued.

“It is a letter. She has vowed to keep her silence for the time being, but only for two weeks. We must decide what we are going to do, and quickly, before she changes her mind,” he said with a sigh.

“I agree with her,” Joseph said, nodding to his brothers to take the first coach. Charlie was relieved that Joseph wasn’t going to make them all cram into one with the instruments, the way he so often did.

“I am certain you do. You always want me to do the difficult thing,” Charlie said with a discouraged laugh.

“That is because it is so often also the right thing to do. You need to stand firm and push against the most assured displeasure of her father. If you truly want her to be your wife, you must ensure that you are bold enough to meet her father head-on. You must be brave and secure, Charlie,” Joseph said.

“And how am I meant to do that? You know as well as I do that he will refuse,” Charlie said, frightened that he had utterly destroyed his chances, that he would never again have the opportunity to pursue the match as he wanted with Pippa.

“You know as well as I do that there is but one way to be bold, and that is to simply be bold. You have no choice now. If you wish to marry her, you must pursue her. Nothing else is acceptable. You may either be the man she hopes for, or you may be the sort of man who cowers and abandons the woman you care for in the hopes that luck



will simply find you. I can assure you that it shall not,” Joseph said.

The moon was high overhead, and the stars shone brightly, illuminating the next coach that came for them. Joseph and Charlie nodded to the coachman, who opened the door and allowed them to get in.

Charlie thought for a moment about his station. No, he was not rich. Nor would he ever be. But he was not completely poor, either. He was able to dress well enough to perform at events with nobility. He was able to keep his piano in excellent condition and purchase new scores to learn and play whenever he wished. Indeed, he was very fortunate compared to many.

But it was still not enough. He had been orphaned as a young man, and he had no title or fortune to his name. What could he possibly do to convince Lord Bregman that Charlie was a man worth his daughter? It was an impossibility.

“I know that you fear what shall happen when you address him,” Joseph said as Charlie slid into the coach after him and the door closed.

“I would be a fool not to,” Charlie replied.

“But have you considered the possibility that Lord Bregman might actually approve of you? That he might think you are worthy of his daughter, after all?”

“Of course I have not considered that. And even if I had, it is not Lord

Bregman I must fear the most. It is his wife. She is the one who is truly hateful towards men like myself. At least, according to Lady Pippa, she is very much the sort of woman who believes that money is power and love is nonsense,” Charlie said.

“Sounds to me as though she is both bleak and reasonable,” Joseph said with a laugh.

“I wish that you did not see it that way. Honestly, it is not reasonable to think that love is a worthless ploy as she does. Love is incredible, Joseph. There is a reason many have died for it, and we are constantly performing music that rings of it for those who dance for it. Love is unlike anything else in all the world,” Charlie said, sighing in thought.

“That is a very pretty thing to say, but you are a fool,” Joseph said.

“And why is that? Because you disagree?” Charlie asked.

“Because if you really thought it was so worthwhile, you would not be in this coach, discussing the matter with me. You would be chasing after the woman you claim to love, begging her to allow you the chance to confront her father. You would insist that no one stands in your way, but that you could pursue her freely,” Joseph said.

Charlie paused, considering his friend’s words. Joseph was right. Had Charlie been a fool? Was he a coward? He had been attempting wisdom, but maybe he was simply afraid. Maybe he had missed a chance to have what he claimed he wanted, purely because he was too frightened to take the necessary stand.

What did Pippa think of him for this? Was she embarrassed or ashamed that she had fallen in love with a man who could not stand firm on her behalf? Was she angry that he had not approached her father that very evening and brought all this to an end? Was she wondering when he would stand up and be brave enough to ask for her hand in marriage?

The more Charlie thought about it, the more he wished he had been bold enough to remain in the room with her aunt that evening and declare his love for her. All he had to do was stay, and he would have been able to make his case and begin the process of asking for Pippa's hand. Even if her father refused, he should have done what little he could.

"How have I been such a fool?" Charlie asked.

"Because you are in love, and you know not how to handle it. I do not envy your position, nor do I think I could bear it as you have, but I still wish that you would be willing to do what most needs to be done," Joseph said. "And if you cannot, the only thing left for you is that you give up."

"Give up?"

"Of course. What? Do you think you can go on like this forever? You have been offered two weeks, Charlie. Two mere weeks. You must either find your courage or you must let it go and hope that Lady Andrews utters not a word if you decide to leave all this behind," Joseph said.

Charlie could never leave Pippa behind. That was the only thing he was sure about. She was too important to him, and he could never

betray her by walking away.

The coach took them down the road and, after a while, Charlie tapped at the top and called out to the coachman.

“Stop here for a moment!”

“What are you doing?” Joseph asked, clearly confused by Charlie’s actions.

“I am taking the first step,” he replied as the coach stopped. Charlie opened the door and smiled at his friend.

“First step towards what?”

“Before I can confront Lord Bregman, I must speak with Lady Pippa. I need to know what she wants, and once I do, I can discern what it is that a man such as I must then do,” he replied.

Joseph sighed and winced painfully but appeared as though he was trying to remain positive for Charlie’s sake.

“Very well. I wish you all the best, and I hope that you can achieve whatever it is you are seeking. Remember, Charlie, there may be difficult days ahead, but you are more than able to overcome them. Just be sure that this is truly what you want. Otherwise, I fear that you are leading yourself into folly,” Joseph warned again.

Charlie knew precisely what his friend meant, but he would not hear it. Not now. This was finally the time when Charlie was ready to be bold and to pursue the woman he loved, no matter the cost. Whatever she wanted from him, he would do it.

Nothing was going to stand in his way. All he could do was hope that Pippa felt the same.

## Chapter 24

Pippa saw the white ribbon at last and rushed outside. Her family was already asleep, and she couldn't bear it any longer, being separated from Charlie.

When she reached the tree line, Pippa quickly darted a few paces down the path to where Charlie stood, waiting for her.

"Oh, Charlie!" she gasped, falling into his embrace.

"Pippa. I am so sorry for all that happened this evening. I never meant you to get into any trouble," he said.

"No, you mustn't worry. I am in no trouble. Rather, I greatly feared that you might be. I thought for sure that you were going to be sent away for being gone so long, and I also worried that you might run off after Elizabeth saw us," she said, speaking in a hurry.

"I was sure that she would send for your father, and he would come after me," Charlie said.

"No, she will not. She promised me that we have two weeks to figure out what we are going to do. After that, she said she would tell my father. But that still gives us two weeks, Charlie. We have that time to decide," Pippa said in relief, hoping that he, too, would be grateful for it.

She saw a strange look of determination in Charlie's eyes, something new and different. It nearly gave her chills, but she was not frightened by the look. Rather, she found it intriguing and was curious to know what his heart had set on.

"We do indeed have time, Pippa. However, I do not wish to take very long. Instead, I have thought about what must happen. Truly, I think the best thing would be for me to be bold," Charlie said.

Pippa wondered what he meant by that. What sort of boldness was he hoping to express? Charlie was such a good man, and Pippa nearly melted whenever she thought of him, but thus far, the boldness she had seen in him was resigned to her only. He was bold in his affection for her and in his wooing her. She still did not know him well enough to know other ways he might be bold.

"I know that our chance to be together is very slight. I know that everything is stacked against us, and I would be a fool to have hope that we might gain the approval of your mother and father. Nevertheless, I should like to seek that very thing," he said.

"You wish to ask them?" she asked in surprise.

"I think the best thing for me to do would be that I approach your father. He must know that I wish to court you. I expect that he shall, at first, laugh in my face. But I shall take no offence. I know that he will only want what is best for you, and it is going to take time to convince him that I just might be that very thing," Charlie said.

Pippa was proud of Charlie for thinking that way. Moreover, she was impressed by him for being so brave. Nevertheless, she couldn't

imagine what might happen were he to make this exchange with her father. Surely her father would be furious.

He would do more than simply laugh in Charlie's face. More than likely, he would have Charlie carted off and thrown in whatever facility he possibly could. Even if Charlie didn't mention the sheet music or sneaking onto their property regularly, it would still be quite dangerous for him.

Pippa admired the fact that Charlie wanted to take a stand and do something like this so that they could be together, but she was frightened. She had the most horrid feeling that her father would be furious, but it was nothing compared to how her mother would respond.

Indeed, she was quite sure that her mother would insist upon ruining Charlie forever. He would never have another opportunity to play his music. He would be cast aside by society and lose his position as the pianist among his friends.

She knew, as well, that her mother would enforce an even stricter timeline on Pippa's marriage. After all, her mother had already gone out of her way to try and ensure there was a match with Lord Ganton. What would she do if she learned that Pippa had fallen in love with a man who had no wealth or title? She would just as soon throw Pippa into the church and demand the wedding occur without a moment's notice.

As Charlie stood there, his lovely blue eyes sparkling in the moonlight, Pippa knew that she had to stop him before he did something too courageous.



“Pippa? Did you hear me? I shall ask him for his permission. Humbly and gently, I shall simply tell him that I care deeply for you, and I would be so grateful for the opportunity to show him that I can provide for you and be a man worthy of you,” Charlie said.

“Charlie ...”

Pippa saw the light fade from his eyes as she spoke his name softly but full of regret and worry for his sake.

“You do not approve?” he asked.

“I should like nothing more than your boldness, and I would be glad if it were enough to convince my father, but I cannot have hope like that. I know him. I know my mother, moreover. I appreciate what you wish to do, but I would like to suggest an alternative,” she said.

He nodded, but Pippa could still see that he was defeated, that he had hoped for more.

“I think there shall be a time for that very soon, but I ask that you would allow me to speak with my father first. Once I have spoken with him, we may approach my mother. You see, my father is not likely to approve at once, but I do believe that I may find a way to ease him into the idea. I still doubt that he will give his blessing, but it is better that I address the idea with him and see what happens. My mother, however, shall be impossible. I cannot imagine she would ever allow this,” Pippa said.

“I understand,” he said, his voice flat with giving up.

“You need not think that this is the end for us, Charlie. I assure you that I am not giving up. I am merely asking you for more time. We have two weeks, and I will use those two weeks to ease my father into the idea and ask him for the opportunity to be courted by you. Once I have an answer from him, we shall inform Elizabeth that he knows. My father and I shall then find a way to address the issue with my mother,” Pippa explained, hoping that this extra detail would give him some peace on the matter.

“And if your father outright refuses?”

“I expect that he shall from the start. But, as I said, I will do whatever I can to convince him to think about this before he simply writes away the idea. I hope you know by now that I am not going to let this go easily. I shall never give up, so long as I have the chance to fight for us,” Pippa declared.

Charlie still appeared unconvinced, but Pippa thought she also saw a hint of relief in his eyes. It seemed to her that he was secretly glad she would not allow him to approach her father until after he was ready for it. Still, Charlie said nothing to the effect, and Pippa decided to take his arm and loop hers through it, leading him on a walk away from the house.

“Please, Charlie, do not think that this is unimportant to me. I merely want to do it the best way we are able. Now, will you walk with me for a while?”

He went alongside her, and she felt his tension begin to slowly fade.

“It is a lovely night,” he said, looking up at the stars.

“It truly is. I am in awe of evenings like this, when we may look up and see all the glory of the night. There have been many times in my life when I thought there could never be such beauty, but looking at it now, I wonder why I could have had such a grim view. Perhaps it is because you are beside me that I now see things in a new way,” Pippa said.

“Is that so?” Charlie asked with a laugh.

“Indeed, it is. Before, I imagined there was beauty in the rest of the world, but I never had any hope that I might see it. And I enjoyed music, but it had only a few dimensions to it. Now? Having met you, I can see just how grand the world is. I can hear the depths of music. You have shown me a new way of looking at life, and it is something I hope I never abandon,” Pippa said.

They were quiet for a while, walking together and enjoying the cool air around them. It was not too chilly, but Pippa was relieved by how refreshing it was. She didn’t want to turn around and go back, even when she knew that it would soon be time.

The last thing Pippa wanted was to return home. She knew she would have to go to bed and make herself ready for whatever the following day might hold. More than likely, it would be a luncheon or tea with some fine lady. If not that, she would wind up having dinner with Lord Ganton and would be forced to behave as though she was romantically inclined towards him.

Still, she hoped she had been successful in shifting his interests to

Lady Anne. If Lord Ganton could just find another woman more intriguing than he found Pippa, there might still be a chance that he would let go of her, and they could break amicably.

Her mother would be furious with him, regardless, but that was not something a man like Lord Ganton would take to heart. His reputation would not be ruined simply because of a disappointed mother, even one who had the society pages in her grip at all times.

Not only was Pippa hopeful that she could convince Lord Ganton to pursue another woman, but she was also hopeful that she, herself, could stay out of those pages. If someone other than her mother learned about Charlie, it was very likely that Pippa would be the topic of scandal and gossip that she would never be able to escape. Her mother would not forgive her.

But how could Pippa let go of Charlie for all of that? How could she simply forget about him just to avoid a public embarrassment for the sake of her family?

“Pippa, do you think there is truly hope for us? I long to imagine it, but the fact is, we are not in a place to even have hope for it. I cannot abide the idea that you and I fight for something only to watch it fall away,” Charlie said.

Pippa paused and turned to him, hurt by his words.

“Are you saying that it is not worth fighting for if we fail? Do you think that we ought to simply cease in our efforts to be together because the chances are so little?” she asked, hoping to keep her emotions at bay but angry that he would even suggest it.

“I am asking if you are quite certain that this is what you want. As for me, I would do whatever it takes. I am happy to beg and plead with your father if that is the only hope we have. But only if that is what you want as well. Only if you think it is worth it,” he said.

Pippa drew near to Charlie once more and looked up at him, staring deeply into his eyes. She could barely catch her breath from the nearness of him but knew that she had to tell him just how much she wanted to be his.

“Charlie, there is nothing in my life more worthy of my time, effort, or hope. You appeared as if from nowhere and, suddenly, you are the most important thing in all the world. I could not give up on the chance for us to be together, no matter how difficult it might be or how unreasonable. I care nothing for the thoughts and opinions of others. If you and I might have even the slightest of chances, it is a chance I shall take,” she promised.

With that, Charlie placed a hand gently at the back of Pippa’s head, and he leaned forward, offering her the sweetest of kisses in the moonlight.

## Chapter 25

The knock on the door startled Charlie and caused him to smear the ink on the paper. He had been working hard on a new composition, but now, his half note on Middle C had become an ugly quarter note with a blob at the end of the tail.

He stood and rushed to the door, leaving everything at the pianoforte and planning to return to it in a moment. Joseph, Nathan, and Simon were all out, and Charlie figured that whoever was stopping by had come to see the brothers or beg for money. Either way, Charlie feared he would be of little use.

When the door opened, however, Charlie was shocked to see none other than Lady Andrews standing before him.

“L-Lady Andrews?” he asked, suddenly remembering to bow.

“Yes, Mr Thomas, good afternoon. May I come in?” she asked.

He quickly got out of her way and gestured for her to come inside and sit on the chaise.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Would you like tea? Is there anything I may get for you?” he offered.

“No, thank you. As a matter of fact, I simply wish to speak with you for a moment, if you do not mind,” she said.

“Of course. Whatever you wish,” Charlie said, sitting across from her.

“You have quite a nice home,” she said with surprise.

Charlie knew that it was customary to offer the compliment, but when he realised that she was genuine, that she had not expected him to live anywhere like this, Charlie was quite pleased.

“I am glad that you think so; that is very kind of you. It is small, but we have done our best to keep it clean and fashionable,” he said.

“You live with the others in your quartet?”

“I do, indeed. They are not here at the moment. In fact, begging your pardon, but is it quite all right for you to be here alone with me? I understand you are soon to be married, and I should not like to cause you any strife,” he said.

She chuckled to herself and shook her head.

“Mr Thomas, I am old enough that no one fears my going out alone. However, I do find it amusing that you should worry for my sake when I have seen how you behave with my niece when you are alone

with her,” she said, reminding him at last.

“Yes, of course, Lady Andrews,” he said, exhaling slowly and looking away with embarrassment.

“You need not be ashamed, Mr Thomas. I can see clearly that she is fond of you and you of her. I am not here to scold you or to insist that you stay away from her. Although there is a part of me that should like nothing more than that, I am aware that it would do no good at all,” she said.

“Is that so? And why not? I should think that you would be happy to see me ruined,” he confessed.

“And, perhaps, a woman such as myself would be right to feel that way. Nevertheless, I do not. What I do feel is that I am very protective of Lady Pippa, and I am going to make certain that you are not someone who shall get her into any trouble,” she said, the threat underlying her tone.

“I see. That is very good of you, and I am glad she has a protector such as yourself,” Charlie said.

“Indeed, she does. I would be most grateful if you would hear me before you make any further declarations about her. Are you willing to listen that you might actually have an idea what it is you are getting yourself into?” she asked.

“Of course, Lady Andrews,” Charlie said.



“Very well. Then I must begin by telling you that this is not going to be simple if you decide to pursue Lady Pippa. You clearly care for her, but that is not going to make the journey any less difficult,” she said.

“I never expected that it would be—”

“Begging your pardon, Mr Thomas, but I instructed you to listen. I wish you to hear me before you speak,” she said.

Charlie gave a single nod of understanding before she moved on.

“My brother, Lord Bregman, is a very good man. He is a forgiving man, and he is patient. However, he is not an overly happy man, and he does have a solid understanding of what is expected of him in society. That is, perhaps, the first thing you ought to know about him,” she said.

Charlie wasn’t sure why she was bringing all this up or why he needed to hear it before she was willing to share anything further with him. It was good that Lord Bregman was as good a man as Lady Andrews claimed, but his happiness was something Charlie had never taken the time to consider, and he was not sure, now, what that would mean for him.

“He married his wife for the same reason so many find themselves marrying. He understood that he had a duty to his mother and father. He had to marry for the sake of wealth and prestige. You see, he had a title and a little money. Her father had a slightly lesser title and a great deal of money. Therefore, they married,” Lady Andrews explained.

Charlie had heard this arrangement time and time again. It was an ideal trade. Even men as wealthy as Lord Bregman could do with marrying someone who had even more money than he. Now, it was perfectly clear that Pippa had been born into the same circumstance as so many of her peers. She was, likewise, expected to marry a man with a strong title and full accounts.

“Lady Bregman married my brother for the same reason he married her. She had no love for him, but her mother and father were painfully strict. They demanded the highest perfection of their daughter and, because of that, Lady Pippa’s mother became the woman she now is. Clearly, she is not the sort of woman that I should like my brother to spend his life beside,” she said dryly.

Charlie was discouraged to hear this, although it echoed sentiments he had heard from Pippa as well. Her mother seemed to be such a difficult woman. It was a wonder there was any happiness within the family when that woman was so intent upon destroying every else’s joy.

“They do not love one another, which is a great shame. I, myself, made the commitment that I would never marry as my brother did. I would only marry for love, and I would be intent on that, no matter the cost. Still, even I knew that I had to marry within my rank. I had to marry a man who was noble because that would be the only thing acceptable to my family,” Lady Andrews said.

Charlie waited as she paused for a moment and looked at him intently.

“Do you understand what I am saying, Mr Thomas?”

“You are saying that society is more inclined to accept a miserable couple than an unequal couple,” he said.

“Indeed. At least you are very clever,” she said.

It was a pitiful compliment, and Charlie had to fight not to be insulted by it.

“Please understand, I have nothing against you, and I would be perfectly happy to see Lady Pippa marry you if that was what you both wished for. I, however, am not the one you must convince of this. My brother is going to be difficult, but his wife shall be nearly impossible. She will not be kind to you, and you must prepare for that now before you allow yourself to go any further,” she said.

“May I speak?” Charlie asked.

“Please. Thank you for listening, but yes, you may speak,” she said with a kind laugh.

“Lady Pippa has told me enough that I might be aware of her mother’s assured disapproval. She has also told me that it is unlikely that her father will allow this, although we are going to do whatever we can to convince him to give me a chance to court her. I am grateful that you have come to me, but I must ask if you have come only to tell me to keep away from your niece,” he said.

She seemed to think about that for a moment, looking up and off to the left, clearly wondering herself what it was that she meant.

“I think that I have come merely to tell you that you need to make a choice. Society will never accept it. Her mother will never accept it. And you will be very lucky, indeed, if her father is willing to hear anything about it. That is what I came here to tell you. I simply wanted you to be aware of the battle ahead and urge you to decide if this is really what you want,” she said.

“And if I tell you now that I have never wanted anything so much as a life spent with Lady Pippa? If I tell you that she is the only thing in the world that brings me joy? What then? Will you give me your blessing and offer to aid us, or are you simply going to approach your brother and urge him to send away the fool who believes he could ever have a chance with a noblewoman?” he asked.

“I have already told you that I shall give you two weeks. Well, that is twelve days now. But I came here because I cannot bear to see Lady Pippa get hurt. I shall not allow it at any cost. And if you are unprepared for the difficulties that are soon to unfold, that is your own mistake. I will not give you a chance to make a fool of her, and I hope that you are prepared for that,” she said.

Charlie knew she was right. Pippa could get hurt in this if he was not careful. In fact, if he was not careful, it was most assured that she would get hurt. She would lose everything that mattered most. She risked the chance of being cast out from her family, of being thrown aside or disowned. They would have to face so many challenges, and Charlie understood that it would all be his fault.

“Now, I do believe that I have left you with more than enough to consider. If you need anything, you may send for me. Please do so under the guise of questions regarding the music I should like played

at the reception after my wedding as, despite my better judgement, I still intend to have you and your friends as my musicians,” she said, smiling mischievously at him.

Charlie couldn't help smiling back, grateful that she tried to make even this difficult moment seem light and easy. He knew there were a great many reasons to worry, but he was beginning to think that, perhaps, Lady Andrews was willing to argue on his behalf. He didn't want to ask her outright, but she seemed so kind, so gentle, that she just might be someone he could consider an aid in this fight to spend his life with Pippa.

Perhaps that was truly nonsensical of him to imagine, but he couldn't quite help himself. He was realising just how desperate he was, and if there were any hope at all, he would seek it out. No matter how foolish it made him, he couldn't quite let go.

“I promise you that I shall do my best to decide and to decide quickly. I know that you are correct in your assessment,” he said.

“Indeed, I am. And I am glad that you are willing to decide quickly because that is always how decisions such as this must be made. In fact, the sooner, the better. Lady Pippa needs to know as she intends to speak with her father slowly over these next few days and, if you are going to step back, you had best do so before she gets herself into any trouble,” she said.

“I do not expect to step back, Lady Andrews. But I do expect to step forward with wisdom and caution. I thank you for the warnings you have issued, and I promise you that Lady Pippa's best interests are in my mind,” he said.

With that, she gave him one final smile of understanding before she stood and made for the door. Charlie raced ahead of her to open it and see her out, but she was gone in a moment, and he knew that he needed to sit down and take some time to think.

Whatever compositions he had been working on before, they no longer mattered. He needed to figure out his next steps and how he might approach the days ahead.

He longed for nothing more than a life spent with Pippa, but how that would come to pass, only time could tell. For now, he would fight as best he could.

## Chapter 26

Pippa made her way to the parlour just in time. She heard the maid answering the front door and Lord Ganton's soft rumble as he greeted the maid and entered the home. A moment later, he entered the parlour.

"Lord and Lady Bregman, Lady Pippa, how wonderful to see you all this evening," he said, bowing.

"And you, Lord Ganton," Pippa replied with a curtsy.

Lord Ganton sat in the chair nearest her, and the maid brought the tea.

"Thank you for having me over for dinner this evening," he said to her mother and father.

"We are delighted to have you," her mother replied with that same, forced smile she always wore with company. Pippa's father appeared happy but somewhat strange. It was as though his own smile was true but uncertain. Pippa could not be sure what was bothering him.

"I do believe that the meal is ready, Lord Ganton. We may bring our tea, or if you prefer, the maid can bring a fresh batch after," Pippa's father offered.

“Oh, I shouldn’t like it to go to waste. Let us simply take it with us,” he suggested with a smile.

Pippa appreciated that Lord Ganton was not as wasteful as many others, and she was glad that he had made this decision. It was a small thing, but it mattered to her and reminded her that he really was a good man, even if she did not love him.

Still, once they were seated in the dining room and the conversation sparked, Pippa couldn’t help mentioning Lady Anne when it was appropriate.

“I do believe that Lord Watham has one of the finer tobacco companies in England at the moment. Have you tried it?” Pippa’s father asked.

“I have not. I shall do my best to seek it out,” Lord Ganton replied.

“Lord Watham is Lady Anne’s father,” Pippa explained. “I do believe you remember Lady Anne. She was the one who danced so gracefully at the ball a few evenings ago.”

Pippa could feel her mother’s eyes burning into her, but she refused to look in her mother’s direction. It was far more important at that moment that she press the idea of Lady Anne towards Lord Ganton.

“Ah, yes. I do recall the young woman. Very well, it is good to know that he is her father,” Lord Ganton said, shifting uncomfortably.



“Did you hear that, darling?” Pippa’s mother asked her father with a laugh. “Our dearest girl admiring another woman’s ability to dance? Oh, Pippa, dear, you know that you are a perfectly fine dancer. And your reputation has never been in question. Other fine young ladies do not always have that luxury.”

The statement hinted at the possibility that Lady Anne may have been involved in a scandal, but Pippa knew that was untrue, and she didn’t want her mother to get away with suggesting otherwise.

“Yes, that is true, but Lady Anne is not one of those young women either. Anyway, I only mentioned it because her father is a great man for trade,” Pippa said, behaving as though her sentiment was made without any other intention.

Still, she knew that her mother was angry, but Pippa was not going to relent or give a chance for anyone to scold her for it.

The dinner went along, and Pippa said very little, allowing her mother and father to lead most of the discussions. Her father was particularly eager to chat about different foreign experiences that Lord Ganton had, but this time, Pippa did not show as much interest. She was trying to figure out ways to create a gentle separation between her and Lord Ganton, to give him reason to question whether or not he was truly interested in her.

As the dinner drew to a close, Lord Ganton suddenly appeared nervous.

“Lord Bregman, Lady Bregman, may I have a moment with your daughter?” he asked, causing Pippa’s heart to race and her skin to feel

cold.

Her mother grinned happily, and her father gave a contented look of approval. Pippa hoped with every beat of her heart that Lord Ganton was about to tell her that he could no longer pursue her, but as he walked with her to the parlour, she had a dread that something else was at play.

“May we?” he asked, gesturing for her to enter the room.

Pippa went ahead, and Lord Ganton followed her. She turned to him and stood stiffly, worried about whatever he was soon to say.

“Lady Pippa,” he began, barely meeting her gaze. “I know that we have not known one another for very long, but I do find you most intriguing. It would appear that your mother and father are quite fond of the idea that we might decide to be married.”

He paused and took a deep breath. Pippa held hers, terrified that he would make her an offer, yet still hopeful that he was simply trying to let her down without hurting her feelings.

“I must confess that I am fond of this idea as well,” he said, at last, shattering all hopes Pippa had been clinging to.

“Fond of ... of the idea that we might be married?” she asked, her voice squeaking at the end.

“Yes, Lady Pippa,” he said, smiling with relief. “That is what I hope for. I should very much like to make you my wife and, if you would consent, I do hope that we have many years of happiness ahead of us.”

Pippa said nothing for a long moment. She was completely shocked. Had she known this was a possibility? To be sure, this had been coming for quite some time. And yet, she could hardly bear to think that Lord Ganton was actually asking her to be his wife.

She couldn't imagine their future together. Had he not been interested in Lady Anne? And did he really love Pippa, or was he simply satisfied with the idea that they got along well and she understood his humour?

“I must confess that your silence is agony, Lady Pippa. Will you consent to be my wife?” he asked again.

“Lord Ganton, please forgive me. I am in shock. I was not aware that you would approach me in this regard so soon. Indeed, I thought you still had not decided if you even like me,” she admitted with a nervous laugh.

“I wanted to give myself time to be sure, but I certainly am fond of you. I thought that was obvious,” he said by way of defence.

“I am not sure what to say,” she replied, still trying to search for the right words. Although she did not wish to offend him, Pippa knew that things would only get worse if she accepted his proposal now and then rejected it in the days to come.

She was still trying to find the right moment to speak with her father and ease him into the idea of her love for Charlie. But this? How could she overcome the fact that Lord Ganton was proposing to her?

“I would hope that you might say you accept, that you would be willing to marry me. Is that a fool’s hope?” he asked, clearly uncertain and worried.

Pippa bit her lip, wishing that none of this was happening. How could she reply? She wanted to run from the room or even from the house itself. She longed to disappear into the forest and out to find where Charlie lived, to beg him to take her away where she would never have to return to this unhappy home.

“Lord Ganton, I am very fond of you. I think you are a kind man. And I expect that you have spoken with my father and gained his permission,” she began.

“I did. Of course, I did,” he said eagerly. It seemed he had a renewed hope in confirming this.

“However,” she continued, watching his eyes fall. “The way in which I care for you is that of a friend. I find you to be a wonderful companion and a most entertaining friend, but I fear that I do not love you in such a way that I might wish to be married.”

Although she had done all she could to let him down gently, Pippa could see the hurt and confusion in his face. He would not look at her, but he did not have to. Pippa understood that she had made him sad. Although he showed no anger, he was distraught, and it was entirely her own fault.

“I ... I do not understand. You seemed to think well of me,” he said.

“I do!” she insisted. “I think very well of you. But, as I have said, it is not enough to marry a man simply because I respect him. You are a far better man than most, but you deserve a wife who will truly love you. It would not be fair if I ...”

“I understand,” he said, putting up a hand to silence her. Lord Ganton remained calm and gave her a sweet, sad smile.

“I never meant to cause you any hurt,” Pippa said.

“I know that. You are far too lovely a woman to have done this out of spite, Lady Pippa. I would never doubt your intentions, and you needn’t worry about that. No matter what, I shall always speak of you with the utmost respect as a woman of elegance and dignity,” he said. “However, I do believe I must go now.”

“Please, Lord Ganton, I did not mean to make you so uncomfortable,” she said, feeling terrible about what had happened.

“I know, Lady Pippa. But you are right. I should like to be loved. If you cannot give me that, it is best if I go,” he said, bowing and taking his leave before Pippa could offer any further apologies.

She collapsed on the settee and listened to him depart, feeling dreadful for having hurt his feelings. She wondered what she ought to have said to make things better. Was there anything that could have

helped? Had she been a fool to think that she could be soft enough to ease this burden?

Pippa heard the sound of her father calling after him and bursting out the front door to chase Lord Ganton. A moment later, her mother came into the parlour in a furious rage.

“You foolish girl! What have you done? Why is Lord Ganton running off like that after his proposal?” her mother demanded.

“Please, Mother—”

“There is no ‘please’ about this! You are going to marry Lord Ganton! What did you say to him? What did you do?”

“I simply told him that I do not love him, that I think he is a good man, but that I could not be a good wife because I do not feel love for him,” she said, trying to explain herself.

For a long moment, her mother stared at her with shock and vitriol. It was evident that her mother’s rage was only just beginning, that a tirade was soon to occur. Although Pippa was unsure what to do to avoid it, she readied herself for the fact that she would be berated for what she had just done.

“You are the most ungrateful child I have ever known. Your father and I have worked tirelessly to arrange this match. Lord Ganton procured your father’s approval, and this is how you repay him? You have humiliated Lord Ganton and us as well. How dare you try to avoid this marriage? What makes you believe you have any choice in the matter

at all?" her mother hissed.

Pippa took a ragged breath in and tried to focus on what to say. She knew that there was nothing now that would ease her mother's anger, but she still had to try. Anything she could do to calm her own nerves as well as her mother's fury had to be done.

"Mother, I understand you are angry. Could we please speak about this rationally? I know that you wish me to marry Lord Ganton, but I should like to take a moment and consider the options. As you know, there are a great many things involved in a union like this, and we do not need to rush the matter," Pippa said as evenly as she possibly could.

But her mother leaned close and glared at Pippa. At that moment, Pippa saw not only the rage but also a deep hurt in her mother's eyes.

"You have no choice in this matter. This is what must be done, Pippa. You are going to marry this man because he is everything you ought to hope for in a husband. You will marry Lord Ganton, and you have no choice in the matter. Whatever I must do to make things right with him, I shall. Prepare yourself, Pippa," her mother warned. "You are going to be Lady Ganton, and there is nothing you may do to change it."

## Chapter 27

Charlie was eager to visit Pippa again. He felt as though it had been an eternity, and he was desperate to spend time with her. Since the evening of the last ball, they had not been able to speak again, and it was exceedingly difficult to be away at such an important time.

But he had given her a day to rest and then found a letter from her in the tree telling him that Lord Ganton would be coming around for dinner on the night he had come. The following two nights, he and the quartet had travelled out of London to play at parties in the countryside, and he had only just now returned.

After tying the ribbon in the tree, Charlie waited, hopeful that Pippa would come out to meet him soon and they would have an opportunity to discuss all that had taken place in his absence.

It was later than before when she finally arrived, but he saw her approaching at last. At once, however, Charlie noted the look in her eyes, the way her jaw was set with disappointment, the way she did not appear to be quite herself. By the time she reached him, Charlie knew that something was gravely amiss.

“Pippa?”

“Charlie, we must speak. Come, let us go deeper into the trees,” she said, urging him onward.

Charlie followed her, his nerves getting the best of him. What could



possibly make her behave this way? Something was clearly wrong, and he feared that it was something that just might tear them apart.

“What is it, Pippa?” he asked as soon as she began to slow down.

“I am engaged to Lord Ganton,” she said.

The words struck Charlie with a harsh force, nearly causing him to stumble back. Her tone was so flat and matter-of-fact that he was not sure at all how she felt about this information.

“Y-you ...”

“I am being forced to marry him,” she said, this time her voice cracking as she spoke. He could hear that she was emotional, and this was a small comfort to Charlie, knowing that Pippa did not actually want this arrangement.

“What happened? Did your father refuse me?” he asked.

“I never had the chance to ask him, Charlie. You have not been here these last few days, and I know there is much to explain, but you cannot imagine how difficult this has been,” she began.

No, indeed. He could not imagine it. Charlie didn’t want to be hurt, but he couldn’t help it. Why would she consent to this marriage? Why was Pippa allowing them to bully her into something that she claimed not to want? It made no sense to him, and he just wanted her to fight

it. Why would she not fight it?

“You must tell me what has happened,” he said with caution.

Pippa nodded and took a deep breath before beginning her story.

“The day after we last saw one another, I mentioned something small to my father. I simply commented on how glad I am for my Aunt Elizabeth, saying that it is good that she was able to marry a man she loved. I then asked him what he would have done had that man not been nobility,” she said.

“And?”

“And he simply laughed as though the idea was a ridiculous notion. So I pressed him a bit, and he said that he would never expect such a thing from Elizabeth and that it wasn’t worth considering. I was a fool. I thought this was enough of the conversation for one day and intended to speak with him again the next,” she explained.

“But you had dinner with Lord Ganton,” Charlie remarked.

“I actually did approach my father again before that. I told him I had been thinking about our previous conversation and that I thought it was foolish that a woman should not be allowed to marry a man even if he is without a title. That was the moment my father looked at me curiously. I expected him to be angry or to begin quizzing me, but instead, he told me I was right and that it really is foolish,” she continued.

“But that is hopeful. What changed?” Charlie asked, desperate to know how things had shifted so quickly.

“I asked him what would happen if a woman of noble birth were to marry a man who is not, and my father said that it is nothing worth worrying about, and he then got up and departed the room without ceremony. I figured he was busy, but now I know that it is because he had already discussed the matter with Lord Ganton and likely did not wish to ruin the surprise for me in discussing marriage,” she said.

“And Lord Ganton proposed, and you agreed?” Charlie asked, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice.

“Good heavens, no! I refused him,” she insisted. “I told him that I think well of him, but I could not marry him. But my mother was furious. My father chased after him and apologised for my stubbornness, and my mother came to me, telling me I have no choice in the matter and it has already been decided. She then joined Lord Ganton and my father while I hid in my room and cried.”

At this, Pippa’s eyes flooded with tears, and Charlie felt awful for thinking she had betrayed him. He realised she truly was upset, that she didn’t want this any more than he did. It was clear to him that Pippa truly loved him, and she would not have willingly married another. This could not have been her own doing.

“They came to me the next morning and informed me that it had all been arranged and finalised. My mother explained that she told him I was speaking only out of fear and that, as a young woman, I am frightened by the idea of leaving home. She also told him, apparently, that she has never seen me happier than when I am with him and that I speak so highly of him that she has no doubt I am in love,” Pippa

said.

“But, Pippa, you do seem to care for him,” Charlie said painfully. “If you would be happier, I would be willing to—”

“How dare you?” she asked in anger. “Do you mock me? I am fighting this because I love you, and you are willing to give up?”

“No! I have no desire to give up on us, Pippa. I only want you to be happy, and I will do whatever it takes to ensure that it happens,” Charlie insisted.

She didn’t appear convinced, and Charlie realised that by worrying she would walk away from him, he had only made her afraid that he would do the same.

“Please, Pippa. I will do whatever it takes. What else has happened since we last saw one another? Have the plans moved forward?” he asked.

She sighed and nodded.

“The next day, when my father confirmed that the marriage would take place, I begged him to stop it from happening. He was shocked and asked me why I would want that. He pointed out what a good man Lord Ganton is, and I told him that, no matter how kind a man he is, I do not love him. I then, once more, asked my father why I must marry a nobleman,” she continued.

“He said it is because that is how society works, and there is no other choice. I reminded him that his marriage resulted from such a match, and he is miserable. He did not appreciate that, but I had no choice other than to make it clear to him that I would not be willing to have such a miserable life. He said that I would not be so unhappy as he is. I then told him that I had noticed another man ... a man who was not nobility but is certainly noble,” she said, letting the words linger for a moment.

Charlie waited, curious as to what her father said after that.

“He told me then that whatever I believe I feel for another man, I must let it go. He said the arrangements are underway, and I am going to marry Lord Ganton no matter what. I begged and pleaded, offering to tell him everything. He refused to hear it. I assured him that I had not done anything to compromise my virtue, but still he would not listen,” she said, tears streaking down her cheeks.

“At last, he left the room, abandoning me as I sat there, on my knees, weeping and begging him not to do this,” she recounted.

“Pippa ... oh, Pippa,” Charlie said, unable to say anything more. He couldn’t imagine her pain. It was utterly wrong that she should be forced to marry a man if she did not wish to.

Charlie drew her into an embrace and tried to breathe without crying as well. He couldn’t let her suffer through this. No matter what, Charlie had to figure out a way for Pippa to get out of this ridiculous marriage that was clearly going to make her miserable.

“Pippa, my dear, I have an idea,” he said.

She looked up at him, and he gazed into her striking green eyes.

“May we do what I wished before? May I speak with your father? It is clearly our only option. If I do not beg him, he will never allow you the chance to get out of this. I know that he may still refuse, but I cannot allow you to marry Lord Ganton without at least trying to fight for us,” Charlie said.

Pippa shook her head in dismay.

“It will do no good, Charlie. All it is going to do is cause my father to speak ill about you in public, to tear you down. I cannot imagine him softening just because you have come to him. If anything, it will only make things worse,” she said.

“If I cared about my reputation, I would not have brought you those compositions. I would not have dared to leave them in your window, knowing that you could have me arrested at any moment for that. You mustn’t think that I am afraid just because this is a dangerous thing to do, Pippa. I love you, and I am going to fight for that love. No matter how difficult it may be, I have no choice but to try. I want to spend my life with you. You know that,” he said.

“I cannot allow you to lose everything for my sake,” Pippa said.

“But I am risking that I might lose *you*, and you are a far more precious gift than any other,” Charlie said, meaning it with all his heart.

He sensed that Pippa was still frightened by the suggestion. But Charlie couldn't pull back. He would not cower. Not when it meant that Pippa would be forced into a marriage she didn't want. He had no choice.

"Pippa, I have to speak with him. We will discuss the matter. We will decide the best way for me to address your father, but this must be done. I cannot let you marry Lord Ganton if you do not love him," he said.

"And you would risk everything for that?" she asked, incredulous and worried.

"I would risk my life for you, Pippa. I care for nothing, so long as you are unhappy," he told her.

Pippa seemed to melt further into his arms at that moment, and Charlie knew that he needed to say the words he had long been feeling, the words they had danced around for such a long time that it seemed like nonsense now. How was it they had spent so many evenings together and had never made their confession?

"I love you, Pippa. I love you more than anything in all the world," he confessed.

"And I love you," she replied. "I love you in a way I never thought possible."

They stood there, together, amid their profound joy that fought against such painful suffering. Charlie held her tightly, and he leaned down to kiss her, just as he had a few nights before.

Kissing Pippa was the most marvellous experience. He had never imagined that he could feel so much joy from such a little thing, but Pippa seemed to have him under a spell.

When he pulled away, Charlie felt a little dizzy from the experience, but he saw that Pippa was grinning broadly as well. It was wonderful to see her looking so happy despite the nature of their circumstances.

“That was nice,” he said.

“It was. Thank you,” she replied shyly.

“I suppose we ought to get you home so that you can rest. What do you think? Tomorrow night, I can come back, and we can take some time to discuss and plan the best way to approach your father. Is that acceptable?” he asked.

“Yes, it is,” she replied. He sensed her trepidation, but by now, they both understood there was no other choice. This was all they could do, and it had to work.

If it didn't, Pippa would marry a man she did not love, and Charlie would spend the rest of his days writing mournful melodies about his broken heart.



## Chapter 28

Pippa looked at herself in the mirror, wondering if the cut of the gown truly suited her.

“Darling, you look beautiful. I wish I could have had something so lovely when I married your father,” Pippa’s mother said, eyeing her.

The dressmaker had just stepped out to see if she could find a lighter hue of pink as Pippa’s mother insisted, but Pippa could at least try on the ready-made gown to decide what she liked and disliked for the sake of her own dress.

“Well, I still think it is too much, Mother. I can simply wear my nicest gown, just as most women do,” Pippa said.

“But why? Would you not rather have a gown specially made for this day?” her mother asked, as though it was something to aspire to. Pippa thought it was a bit silly, given how rare that was and how only the richest women of society would do something like having a gown custom-made for this one day only.

“It feels like a bit of a waste,” she said.

“You may wear it as many times over as you like after the wedding. But if you save it first for that day, I am sure that Lord Ganton shall be overjoyed,” her mother said.

Pippa tried to smile but could not bring herself to do so.

“Mother, the wedding was only decided a few days ago. Why are we already here, having me measured for a gown? It makes little sense. We do not need to rush like this. Surely, Lord Ganton would be all right with it if we take our time; if we wait until I am ready,” Pippa said.

“Oh, hush,” her mother urged, lightly glaring at Pippa.

Pippa had spent the past few days being silenced by her mother and father. It was infuriating, but she knew by now to expect it. Still, she had not seen Lord Ganton. Her mother had told her that it was better they have a few days apart, but Pippa knew the truth. Her mother feared that Lord Ganton would ask Pippa if she really wanted this marriage, and Pippa would admit that she did not.

If, however, everything was quickly arranged, and the two were marched to the church, Lord Ganton would scarcely have a moment to ask her the truth. He would have no choice but to believe what her mother had said about Pippa simply being nervous as a young woman was so likely to be.

But Pippa knew that Lord Ganton was an intelligent man and, as such, she hoped that he would figure out the truth. She hoped he would be wise enough to insist that he wanted to speak with Pippa on his own and hear from her own lips whether or not she wished to marry him. It was dreadfully unfair if she would not even have the chance to be around him until they were married.

“I simply believe this is all too quick, Mother. Surely Lord Ganton and

I will not be married for at least a few months. Why am I already being fitted for a gown?" Pippa asked.

"It is better this way, Pippa. It is necessary that the two of you marry at once. There is no point in delaying the matter. You shall be happiest if it is done within the coming weeks," her mother said.

Pippa's heart lurched, and she thought she might faint.

"Weeks?"

"Of course! You are a most fortunate woman, and you need to realise that sooner rather than later," her mother said.

Pippa's blood ran cold at the realisation that she was not only being forced to marry Lord Ganton but forced to do so right away to prevent any further difficulties. Her mother and father could not risk anything going wrong, so they were making her do this at once.

Unable to stop herself, Pippa began to cry. The tears were silent at first, but they led to her ragged breathing, which rapidly descended into sobs.

"Pippa!" her mother scolded in a harsh whisper, looking around them at the dressmaker and two other women in the shop who were eyeing Pippa. But although she knew they were staring, she couldn't stop.

Pippa held a hand to her mouth and swiped at the tears, trying to dry

them to avoid any further anger from her mother, but it was useless. She felt the wave of strength break, and Pippa's heart ached so bitterly that she simply couldn't help it any longer. Her throat hurt from the tightness of trying to hold back her emotion, and little gasps of sadness escaped her lips. She was overcome.

She needed more time. She still had to convince her father to allow her to pursue a courtship with Charlie. But now, she was not only engaged but nearly married to another man. How had all of this come about so quickly? She had barely had a moment to breathe before all of this was thrust upon her! What could she possibly do now?

"Pippa, get a hold of yourself!" her mother demanded, coming close and clenching her teeth before flashing one of her false smiles.

"Is everything all right?" the dressmaker asked with great caution.

"Of course! She is simply overcome with tears of joy! You know she is going to marry the great Lord Ganton. She can barely contain herself!" Pippa's mother insisted, reframing the entire scene.

"Oh, how marvellous," the dressmaker said with barely enough enthusiasm to pretend that she believed Pippa's mother.

"Yes, it is a truly wonderful match. At first, I confess, I was unsure of him. I did not know if he would be the right suitor for my daughter, you know. She deserves only the best, and I was unconvinced that he could truly give her the life she deserves. But it quickly became clear that their love for one another was not to be defeated, and I had no choice but to give her my blessing," her mother said.

This only made Pippa more upset, and she sobbed even harder while her mother pinched her hard on the shoulder, forcing Pippa to intake a sharp, pained breath.

“If you will excuse us for a moment,” her mother said.

“Yes, certainly,” the dressmaker replied, scampering off quickly.

“You get a hold of yourself. Change out of that dress at once and march to the coach. I shall do what I can to mitigate the humiliation,” she snapped.

Pippa said nothing but rushed to change back into her dress, grateful that she had not bothered to try on all of the underskirts with the other gown. She hurried out from there and hid in the coach, hoping that her mother would simply tell the coachman to take Pippa away and she would not have to face her mother at all.

However, her mother was not so generous. She came to the coach and climbed in with fire in her eyes as the coachman began to take them away.

“You foolish girl! What is the matter with you? How dare you humiliate me in such a way?” her mother shouted.

“I am sorry, Mother,” Pippa said, still trying to gain control of her emotions.

“Such an outburst is shocking, but to display that sort of emotion in public? You have made fools of us. Your father is going to be furious as well. I can hardly believe you would be so careless. Does our family’s reputation mean nothing at all to you? Are we so unimportant that you do not even care about how we are perceived in public? I never imagined you would be so willing to make fools of us. You are a disgrace,” her mother said, unleashing all her fury.

By the time they reached the estate, Pippa had heard more than enough. She was hurt and angry, wishing that her mother would simply leave her alone.

“Please, Mother, have you not insulted me enough?” Pippa asked, rushing through the door.

“Stop it! How dare you? You do not get to run away from me. Not after what you just did in there. I cannot believe you would shame your father like that either,” her mother said.

“But I do not want this! You are forcing me to marry a man I do not love. I cannot help it that I am emotional, Mother. I have no desire for this life that you want for me, and I am tired of trying to obey you when it seems that your demands are only getting more and more difficult by the day. Why will you not just let me wait for a man that I love?” she asked, hoping that she could talk some reason into a woman who was absolutely impossible.

Pippa knew better. She knew that any argument would only end badly for her. Her mother was a woman incapable of empathy, but still Pippa hoped there was a chance for some peace between them. She hoped there could be something good, even some understanding that they might share. If only she could open up to her mother and ask.

“Who do you believe yourself to be, Pippa? You are not some foolish girl without a name. You are the daughter of a duke and know what that means! You have responsibilities and expectations. There are things you must do, whether you want to do them or not,” her mother said, her tone softening just enough that Pippa could see her mother’s humanity.

“But why? If it is so miserable, if you know that to be true, why would you put me through this? Why would you not make an effort to take care of me and ensure that I never have to experience what you have?” Pippa asked, thinking it the only logical reasoning she had left.

It made no sense that her mother had chosen to repeat the same cycle that had kept her miserable for all those years. If her mother was so unhappy, Pippa thought she would have been willing to give Pippa a chance for something different. It seemed, however, that her mother still believed what her own mother and father had told her for many years.

It was a woman’s duty to be worthy of a man of a higher rank. That was all. There was nothing else about her that truly mattered.

“Pippa, you do not understand. It is the highest honour for a woman to marry a man like Lord Ganton,” her mother said, her tone calmer and her face returning from red to its normal shade.

“A man like Father?” Pippa challenged her.

Sadness clouded her mother’s face for a moment before she swallowed hard and took a deep breath.

“Indeed, Pippa. A man like your father. He is a good man, and you and I both know that well. Whatever else we may want, whatever may seem better than a good man, it is nothing. You need a wealthy, titled husband. Someone who can take care of you and bring pride to the family. That is the duty of a woman like you and a woman like me. Whatever else we want in life, it must be cast aside for this greater thing,” her mother said.

Pippa stood quite still, hoping for one more thing. Anything. She just needed a chance to beg, a chance to show her mother why this idea was so wrong.

“You need to be more grateful, Pippa. You need to understand how fortunate you are,” her mother said.

It was quite the opposite of what Pippa had needed to hear. The last thing she wanted was to be told she was ungrateful. The last thing she needed to hear was that she was fortunate to be in this position. And with that in mind, with her mother’s words still ringing in the air, Pippa finally lost her patience. She’d had enough and could bear the burden no longer.

“Fortunate?” she spat. “Grateful? Is that so, Mother?”

“Pippa, calm yourself. You are far too passionate today,” her mother scolded.

“No, Mother. No, I am *nothing* like you say I am. Rather, I am a woman who knows what makes her happy. I am a woman who desires



a life better than the one you have led. I want to be happy. You may be content with a marriage that makes you miserable, but I am not, and I am going to tell you at this moment, Mother, that I have had enough,” she shouted.

“Pippa!” her mother gasped, clearly shocked by the intensity of this newest outburst.

“No, Mother! I will not be quiet. I will not be called a fool! I love another man! Do you hear me? I am in love. I care for him. I want to be his wife. And you are taking me away from him to force me into a marriage that could never make me happy. You are no different from your own mother and father, and you are going to make me as bitter and resentful as you are!” she shouted.

With that, Pippa ran from the room, unable to stay a moment longer.

She couldn’t bear to hear anything more from her mother. She couldn’t bear to stay or listen to whatever else her mother might say or scold or claim. She’d had enough, and she missed Charlie.

Nothing would heal her heart if she were separated from him forever. All Pippa had now was the hope that she and Charlie would find a way. Even if it meant losing everything else.

## Chapter 29

Just as the night before, Charlie could tell something was different with Pippa right away. As she approached him, her shoulders were slumped, her frown visible, her eyes downcast. Something more had happened. Things were even worse than the day before.

And he had no idea how he was going to fix it.

“Pippa? What is it now? What has happened? Please, tell me. What must I do?” Charlie asked.

Pippa looked up at him, and it was clear that she had been crying. A lot. She seemed broken. He feared that it meant she would marry Lord Ganton the following day or something equally dramatic.

It was clear that she was in pain, and Charlie didn’t know what to do to ease her worries. She wasn’t speaking, and he sensed she was hesitant, that whatever had happened was bad enough that she was simply frightened to recount it.

He was beginning to wonder if she had come out here to tell him that she no longer wanted to pursue their love, but Charlie tried to calm himself rather than getting all worked up without knowing why. Instead, he remained patient and allowed her to find the words she wished to say.

“I had a very fierce argument with my mother,” she told him, her voice scratching. The evidence of her crying was painful to see, and

Charlie wished he could just make it all better. He wanted to make her pain go away and never return.

“I am sorry, my love. I know that must have been difficult. I suspect that she is still trying to force you into the marriage she is arranging?” he asked, searching for more information but not wanting to rush Pippa.

Whatever had happened, it was enough to push her past a point that he had never seen before. He had never seen Pippa this discouraged. He hadn’t known it was even possible. Nevertheless, whatever led her to feel this way, he was going to do whatever he could to make it right for her.

“It is more than that,” she said. “She wants me to marry him within weeks, and I wept quite openly in public. She was furious. We shouted at one another, something I have never done before. I am ashamed of how I behaved, but there was nothing more to do. She would not listen.”

“How could you remain silent about something like that? I am sure you had no choice but to express your frustration,” Charlie said, understanding that she shouldn’t have to stay quiet when it caused her such pain. He was furious that her mother and father were trying to silence her like this.

She was sad, and he was going to ensure that she had a place to release that sadness. Even if he learned something he didn’t want to hear, he would listen. Even if it were painful for him, he would listen. Even if it turned out that she was going to leave him, he would listen.

“It is more than that,” she said again, as though the troubles were layered one over the other and nothing could ease her burdens. “I

finally shouted at her that I was in love with another man. She knows now that I have found someone else. But I ran to my room, and she did not come after me. I am sure that she is terribly angry, and I expect that, tomorrow, she and my father will come to me and demand to know who you are.”

“Are you going to tell them?” Charlie asked.

He was both hopeful and frightened. While he knew the devastating consequences if they were to learn the truth, he was also relieved by the idea that they would know at last and the secret would be no more. They would not have to hide any longer. Although they may still not be allowed to be together, at least the hiding would dissipate, and they would not have to pretend they didn’t know one another at balls.

There were so many possibilities that could arise if her mother and father learned the truth about him, and Charlie simply wasn’t sure what he wanted most or what would be problematic rather than a positive notion. He simply wanted whatever would make Pippa the happiest, whatever might benefit her in any way. He was willing to make a sacrifice if that was needed. Whatever he could do to ease her pain, he was willing.

“It really depends,” she answered. “I will not say anything if I believe that it is going to get you into more trouble. But if there is hope? I shall find a way to slowly introduce them to the idea of my love for you. I do believe that my father shall be easier, but he has not stood up for me at all against my mother in the midst of this. I fear that I am greatly surprised by that. I would have thought that he might be willing to stand in my defence.”

Charlie was unsurprised. He would never have expected Lord Bregman to defend his daughter for the fact that she had fallen in love with a

commoner. No matter how much credit Pippa gave him over her mother, he was still a nobleman, and he would still certainly expect his daughter to have more sense than to interact with someone like him.

As Charlie opened his mouth to speak, he heard a sound. Pippa's head darted in the same direction, looking at the path towards the house. The crunch of feet on the earthen path was enough for them to know that someone was not simply coming, but someone was already upon them!

There, in the moonlight, Lord and Lady Bregman both turned along the path and stood facing Charlie and Pippa directly. There was hatred in their eyes when they looked at Charlie, and he knew he would have to explain at once, lest they think he was taking away their daughter's virtue.

"Lord Bregman! Lady Bregman!" he said, bowing as if trying to give them a proper greeting. It was a foolish gesture, but the only one he could think of. He wasn't sure what else to do and didn't know if they would respond better if he at least showed them some form of respect. Hopeful that they might be willing to listen if he proved himself to be a gentleman, Charlie did his best to honour them.

"Mother, Father, please. You do not know what you have come upon. I assure you that nothing improper has taken place," Pippa said in a rush.

Her mother scoffed as her father spoke.

"Nothing improper? Then what do you call this? My daughter is sneaking out in the night to meet a young man, and they are walking,

alone, on the grounds of my property. And you say that is nothing improper?" he demanded.

"Father, he has done nothing to compromise me," she said, clearly knowing what it was he feared the most.

"Lord Bregman, please. Allow me to explain," Charlie said, desperate to be heard before they called for the constable—unless they had already done so.

"Explain? You think that you can explain any of this?" he hissed in anger. "How dare you come out here with my daughter? What do you think you are doing? Who are you?"

"Is this the man you have fallen in love with?" her mother mocked.

"Run!" Pippa shouted at him.

"What?" he asked in surprise. How could she urge him to run? He would not try to escape or be a coward in the midst of this. What was she thinking? Did she really want him to leave her behind like this? Did she want him to escape and leave behind his dignity?

"Run!" she cried again.

"I will not run, Pippa," he said, speaking as calmly as he could.

“You do not address her in the proper form?” her father challenged him.

“Forgive me, Lord Bregman. Please, listen to me for just a moment. We came here tonight to decide how I might speak with you. I wished to tell you that I am in love with your daughter. I have chanced upon her on a few occasions, and then we met at multiple balls. I fell in love with her at once,” he said, not mentioning the sheet music or anything that might get him into further trouble.

“When it became clear that she had fallen in love with me as well, we tried to meet so that we could discuss what the future would look like and how we could procure your blessing. We understand how unlikely it is, how difficult it would be for a man in my position to marry the daughter of a duke. But I must ask you regardless, Lord Bregman. Would you consent to allow me to marry your daughter?”

Charlie had never planned to ask it in this way. There was no chance that he might receive a positive response, and everything had been ruined. But this was the only chance he had. He could either run like a coward, beg like a weasel, or stand firm and simply make his petition, prepared for the rejection he was sure to face.

Lord Bregman, however, was not even able to give him that before Pippa’s mother burst forward.

“Pippa! You get over here right this moment! Foolish girl. How is it that you manage not only to ruin our reputation in one afternoon, but you carry it on here in the night? I can hardly believe I raised you to be such a nonsensical child! Come at once!” she shouted, grabbing hold of Pippa’s arm and practically dragging her.

“Pippa!” Charlie shouted, worried as Pippa released a yelp of either surprise or pain from her mother’s gesture.

“Stay back,” Lord Bregman shouted at him.

“And you! If you ever come around here again, I shall call for the constable!” Lady Bregman threatened, still pulling Pippa away from him.

“I am sorry, Charlie!” Pippa cried as she was taken off along the path.

“Be strong, Pippa!” he urged in reply, not knowing how he would find any strength of his own. Her father turned to him and flashed a hard look of disappointment and blame before he turned away and followed behind Pippa and her mother.

He listened as their footsteps faded, wondering if he had done the wrong thing. Should he have fought harder? Should he have refused to let them take her? Or was he doing the right thing by showing them respect and giving them a chance to speak with Pippa and she could further plead their cause?

Everything felt wrong. Charlie was sure that he ought to have done something more. He could have taken hold of Pippa’s other arm, prevented her mother from dragging her away. He could have thrown himself at the feet of Lord Bregman and begged him to listen and not take Pippa away. He could have shielded her from their efforts.

But it would only have ended badly for them both. No matter how



painful it was to acknowledge, Charlie knew that fighting against Lord and Lady Bregman would have ended the same, except that Charlie would now be sitting in prison. As it was, he knew that he still might find himself there once they identified him.

Charlie stood out there, all alone in the woods along the path. He listened, hopeful that he might hear Pippa's voice, that he might have another chance. But he knew that it was over that evening. He had lost. Love had lost.

There was nothing to do but return home, attempt to sleep, and come back again to fight for her. How he would do that, he wasn't quite sure. Nevertheless, he wouldn't risk losing her forever. If it were going to take time, he would give it time. But he didn't have much of that either.

Pippa was supposed to marry Lord Ganton within a few weeks, and Charlie suspected that her mother and father would only try to move that sooner now they knew how close she had been to finding a way to be with Charlie. There was so little left for them to do, and he had no idea what might help.

All Charlie knew now was that his options were painfully limited, and he was stuck without the woman he loved. Whatever was going to come next, he would have to be ready to fight with all his strength, no matter how painful it proved to be.

## Chapter 30

Pippa was locked in her room and desperate to escape it. She couldn't get out no matter how much she longed to or how much she fought. Nothing could be done now.

At first, when she had been put in there, Pippa had imagined that her mother and father were simply going to leave her there until they figured out what to do about her, but she was now furious. When she looked out the window and stepped onto the balcony, she noticed that something was different. It took only a moment to figure out that the trellis was gone. They had taken it away.

What did that mean? Had they figured out that Charlie had climbed up the trellis before? Or did they think that she would go down it to try and get away? What was in their mind when they decided to remove it? She would never have been able to climb down.

Then again, Pippa realised, she was desperate. Perhaps, in this moment of extreme desperation, she really would have been able to bring herself to doing so. Maybe she would have been able and willing to climb down and run away. And in realising that, she was suddenly distraught that the trellis was gone and she no longer had any option for escape, even though she was eager for the chance.

When the maid came with her breakfast the next morning, one of the footmen came as well. He nailed the window shut so that Pippa could not even go out to the balcony. Now, she would not even be able to look closer to see if Charlie was out in the woods. At night, she would struggle to see past her own reflection in the window.

Everything was being taken away from her, everything that gave her freedom stripped from her hands. She was stuck, and no one would grant her even a moment of freedom.

It was the afternoon after she had been discovered with Charlie, and her father, at last, came to see her in her room.

“Pippa,” he said, taking a seat at her vanity. Pippa curled up on her bed, leaning her back against the wall and holding her knees.

“I know you are very upset with your mother and me, but you must understand why we are taking such extreme measures at this time. What happened was not appropriate. Not at all. You and this young man have gone about all this the wrong way. You did not do what you ought to have done,” he said.

“You know nothing about him or me,” Pippa said, her anger undeniable although she tried to hold herself back.

“What I do know is that the way this took place only caused me to further distrust this young man. I cannot allow someone to be with my daughter in such an improper manner. He has given me no reason to trust him at all, and you must understand that. I cannot allow this. I cannot stand for it. You are my daughter, and you should never be willing to let someone behave thusly if he wants my respect,” her father said.

Pippa did understand, and she knew that, in many ways, her father was right. There had been nothing about her relationship with Charlie that would be considered acceptable by anyone’s standards. Still, she couldn’t seem to make him understand that this was beyond that. She loved Charlie. They couldn’t go about things properly because of his

station.

“What should I have done, Father?” she challenged him. “Would you have approved of a poor musician if Charlie had done things in a way you deem proper? What exactly is the proper way for a man such as him to go about gaining the approval of a duke? What could he have done?”

Her father paused, clearly uncomfortable when faced with this challenge. Pippa was angry, but she had more wrath than even she had been prepared for. She wanted her father to understand just how ridiculous this was and how awful he had been. He had treated her wrongly now, locking her away. He had been rude to Charlie, who was just trying to do what he could to look after Pippa.

She was not surprised when he didn't say anything. What was there to be said? How could he admit that he had done something wrong? How could he confess that he had been selfish in his attempts to keep Pippa only for the marriage of another duke? There was absolutely nothing that her father could say to make matters better, and Pippa just wanted him to relent to the fact that he'd been in error.

“I thought you would have done the right thing,” he finally said. “I always thought my daughter would be intelligent enough not to be caught alone with a man in the woods at night. You know it was improper. You know that he did something that would have destroyed your reputation had it been seen by anyone aside from your mother and myself.”

“You are not listening to me, Father. He was going to do the right thing. The only reason he had not was because you would not have heard him,” she insisted.

“Lord Ganton was able to do the right thing. He secured my permission because that is what a good man does. That is what a gentleman does. Your young man did something very foolish, and he thought that he could get away with it. You are my little girl, and I will never let a man take advantage like that. Never,” he insisted.

“Advantage? Father, you have it all wrong. He did nothing that could be misconstrued. He simply tried to make me happy, and we were thinking of a way to approach you. We were doing all that we could to come up with a plan because we wanted to speak with you about it. We wanted to ensure that you were not unhappy with us. We wanted to do things as you wished us to do them,” she said.

“But you did not, Pippa. You snuck around with that boy, and you were a fool to have allowed it. I never imagined I would catch you in such a position. If your mother had not been suspicious after what you told her today, we would not have known. And when you told me a few days ago that you loved a man who was not a noble, I did not imagine this. I would never have thought of this,” he said.

“What did you think?” she asked fiercely.

“I thought you had simply noticed a man and cared for him. I did not think you would be foolhardy enough to be spending time alone with him. Especially not when it is a betrayal to the man to whom you are engaged,” he said.

“He was going to come to you,” she shouted back. “A week ago, nearly, he asked me if he could come to you and ask for my hand. I told him no. I told him I needed to get you to consider the idea of my marrying someone who was not noble. Then, I told him he could ask you. But not until I had a chance. So you may blame him, but it is me who urged him to wait. And you may blame me, but it is because of

your own stubbornness and your inability to consider that I might love a man who is without a title. That is why this took so long, and that is why we did not come to you,” she said, hoping that he would see the truth of her words.

He stayed quiet a moment longer, as though considering what she had just said. Pippa hoped that he might take his time, that he would think about what she’d said. After all, she was telling him the truth. They would have happily spoken with him sooner and begged him to let them marry. It was all because of his own prejudice that they had not.

“Pippa, you may feel this way about it now, but there are a great many things to consider. You will understand in time,” he said with a sigh.

“In time?” she scoffed. “How is that?”

“You will understand because, one day, you will have a daughter of your own. And as we plan for you to marry Lord Ganton, your daughter will also be in a position like yours. You will know the importance of marrying her into a family with good connections, a family who can benefit her and be good for her. You will want her to marry someone who can provide for her,” he said.

Pippa glared at him and shook her head slowly. She was furious that he would even begin to suggest such a thing.

“No, Father. No, that is not what I will want for my daughter,” she said.

“You say that now ...” he replied with sarcasm.

“I will want my daughter to be happy,” she insisted. “I look at you and Mother. I see your misery. I see that you do not care for one another, and you are doing whatever you can to try and push beyond it, but the two of you cannot stand to be near one another. I find it painful to witness.”

“Your mother and I are in a very different situation,” he said, although Pippa knew it was a mere excuse. The fact was, it was a similar situation in many ways.

“Lord Ganton may be a nice man, but I do not love him,” Pippa said. “We do get along well, but I do not love him. I am marrying him only because you are forcing me to for the sake of money and status, just as you were forced to marry Mother, and she to marry you. There is nothing different, Father. The two of you are married, and you are miserable, and now you are choosing to visit that same misery upon me.”

“Please, Pippa. Hear me. I do not wish you to be miserable. I want only your happiness,” he said.

“That is simply untrue, Father,” she replied. “If you wanted my happiness, you would grant me permission to marry Charlie. He is the one who makes me happy. He is the one I wish to spend my life with. But you will not allow it.”

Pippa let her words hang in the air, and she saw that her father had little to say in reply. She had trapped him, just as he had trapped her in this room. She had worked to make him realise that he was doing nothing that would benefit her. He was only making her life more

difficult. She couldn't bear it any longer. She would do whatever needed to be done to get through this and have the life she wanted.

"I will not sit by quietly and allow you to force me into this life, Father," she said.

"I am not forcing you into anything. I am simply trying to give you what is best," he insisted.

"What is best, Father? Think about it. Truly think about what would be best. Would you rather have me poor and married to someone who makes me happy, or would you have me rich and married to someone who makes me miserable like Mother?" she challenged him.

"You are as good a man as Lord Ganton, but she is unhappy. What is to make me any different? And did Mother love another man? Had she experienced the pain of being torn away from him? If she had, then I would understand. But if not, you must know that this is even worse for me than it would have been for her. If she is this miserable and she never loved another, the sadness I feel now is incomprehensible for the both of you," Pippa said, hoping he would understand the magnitude of it.

"So, what is it, Father? Which would you prefer? My happiness? Or my wealth?"

Her father quietly, slowly stood to his feet. He looked at her for only a flash before turning his eyes to the ground. Without a word, unable to answer her, he made his way to the door and left the room, locking it behind himself.



Pippa felt the weight of everything crash around her. She didn't know what was in her father's mind, but the fact that he locked the door told her that he was still unconvinced. Perhaps, if she was fortunate enough, he was willing to think about what she had said. Maybe, the fact that he could give her no answer would truly make him consider it.

But she did not wish to get her hopes too high. After everything that had happened thus far, Pippa was getting used to disappointment.

She lay in her bed for the rest of the day, waiting for the moments when the maid would come to leave her food or take away the plate she had not touched. She couldn't bring herself to eat. Dismayed as she was, food had no taste, no enjoyment. She simply wanted to fade into nothingness and was certain that the best way to do that was to become a ghost and pretend she was not even there.

As the maid came, Pippa did not reply to a single question that was asked. When her mother came, demanding answers, Pippa remained still.

Her father did not return. The only thing that she noticed changing was the sun sinking and the sky turning dark. But when night fell, she did not see the moon or the stars. Everything was simply black. There was no beauty left.

Only hurt.

## Chapter 31

Charlie couldn't figure out his next steps. Everything was so blurry now. It seemed as though there truly was nothing that could be done.

"Charlie, I know you are anxious about the woman you love, but you must be quick about it. We need to make haste and get to the ball. You promised that you would not allow yourself to be so caught up that it puts our work in danger," Joseph said, pleading with Charlie to finish getting ready.

Charlie looked up at him and nodded sadly. He didn't mean to make things difficult for his friends, but what more could he do? He was desperate to go and rescue Pippa, to find out what had happened to her after they were discovered a few evenings ago.

"Please, do not look at me that way. You know that I hate dragging you out to perform when you are grieving. There is nothing, however, that I can do to change it. We have no choice but to go, lest we ruin our reputation and never manage to find work again," Joseph said.

"I know. You have every right to push me to do what I have committed to doing. Still, I find that I am barely able to move. When I think about what Lady Pippa might be suffering, my heart aches beyond the telling of it," Charlie said.

"Then we should finish this performance, and you may depart as quickly as you wish, hurrying on to find her. Perhaps she may even be at the ball," Joseph suggested with hope.

But Charlie knew in his heart that her mother and father would never allow for that. Not when she had just been caught with him, and they knew the risk of him being the man hired to play. Unless they had already come up with a lie to ruin his reputation while saving Pippa's, they would be more intent upon keeping Pippa away from him than anything else.

"Yes, it is doubtful," Joseph said as if reading his mind. "Nevertheless, I want you to have hope. Just because I have attempted to be a voice of reason does not mean that I do not support you in your affections for Lady Pippa. In fact, I should very much like to see you follow your heart. I only hope that you do not harm yourself in the midst of it."

"I shall do all I can to ensure my life and our work remain unharmed. And should I fail in this effort, it shall only be myself who is impacted. I will not allow you and your brothers to pay the price," Charlie said.

If Lord and Lady Bregman ruined Charlie's name among society, he would have to do a great deal of work to prevent Joseph, Simon, and Nathan from being impacted. Still, he trusted that they would be spared so long as he claimed they knew nothing about his interest in Pippa. Moreover, he could work very hard to find another pianist who might take his place just in case nothing went according to plan.

There were many things that could still go wrong, and Charlie would have hated to risk the happiness and livelihood of others because of his own selfish hopes. He knew that Pippa would also have choices to make, but Charlie hoped they could find a way to be together without hurting anyone else. It seemed impossible, but he was determined to find a way.

For now, he simply had to do his duty for the sake of the quartet.

“We trust you,” Joseph said, sighing.

“I am grateful for that, but I will not do anything to betray that trust. I want to see you and your brothers succeed every bit as much as I want to see my love for Pippa succeed,” Charlie said.

“Thank you for that, Charlie. Now, are you ready to depart?”

Charlie gave a single nod and followed behind Joseph. No matter how much he longed to return to the Bregman estate, he knew it was folly. It was best that he try to enact some sort of wisdom and consider his options before storming in and demanding a chance to speak with Pippa. Her mother and father would only be more inclined to ruin him with that.

Instead, the quartet made their way to the home of Lord Crowley and set up their instruments, beginning to play as soon as they were ready. The guests mingled with one another, and a few started to dance, soon joined by many of the others.

Lord Crowley had informed them that they would have only a ten-minute intermission in the evening to use the facilities or have a short rest. Charlie knew they had been spoilt of late with less strict measures, but he didn't mind so much. If Pippa was not in attendance, he cared nothing about having a break.

The evening wore on, and Charlie made every effort to focus on his playing and not being too dour about the fact that Pippa wasn't around. He missed her, and his heart ached, wondering what had happened and what her mother and father were doing to her. He

hoped that she was all right but could not bring himself to trust them. Although her father appeared to be a good man, he had allowed Pippa's mother to control everything, and she had made them miserable.

During their brief window of rest, Charlie leaned back from the piano and drank some water.

"Tired?" Joseph asked as his brothers rushed off.

"No, not tired," Charlie replied.

Joseph gazed at him with empathy and then looked down.

"You are sad that she is not here. Honestly, Charlie, perhaps it is for the best. You must give her mother and father some time to come to terms with her love for you. They most assuredly need a chance to understand what it is that has led their daughter to fall in love with a musician. It will not be easy for them. You know how nobility act and how they think," Joseph said, whispering the last sentence to ensure no one heard the insult.

"Yes, I know that, but it hardly changed the fact that I am worried for her," he said.

Just then, Charlie saw someone draw near from the corner of his eye. Joseph's eyes widened, and he took a few steps back. When Charlie turned, he saw Lady Elizabeth Andrews subtly placing a piece of paper on the top of the piano, acting as casually as she was able.

“Thank you, gentlemen, for the wonderful music. Tell me, will there be a waltz soon?” she asked, clearly trying to cover her reason for coming over.

“Um ... yes, My Lady. Indeed,” Charlie replied. “In three songs hence.”

“Very well. Thank you,” she said before turning away and departing.

Charlie took the paper and opened it quickly.

*I shall wait in my coach for you to depart after the ball has ended.  
Come speak with me. It is urgent.*

“What did she say?” Joseph asked eagerly.

“She wishes to speak with me after the ball. You and your brothers may depart without me. I am sure I shall be only a few moments behind,” he said.

“If that is what you wish,” Joseph replied.

With Joseph’s brothers having returned, it was time to begin playing again, and Charlie was even more desperate than before to see the evening come to an end. Whatever it was that Lady Andrews wished to address with him, he wanted it done soon.

The next three hours were agony until, at last, the evening came to an end, and the guests began to depart. Lord Crowley came to them and gave the quartet their payment, dismissing them for the night.

“Go. We shall finish up here,” Joseph said, allowing Charlie to race off and find the coach sitting out of the way of the others.

He approached it with hesitation, hoping it was the correct one. But the door opened from the inside, and Lady Andrews peered out at him.

“Hurry up and get in,” she said.

Charlie did as he was commanded and slid into the coach, knowing it would be scandalous if they were caught in here together.

“Mr Thomas, this is very important. I need to tell you what has happened to Pippa. You must know that her mother and father are furious, but it is worse than that,” she said, her eyes intense as she reached out and grasped him by the wrist.

Charlie nearly pulled back, so shocked by her desperation. But he knew in his heart that she was likely desperate because of how serious the situation was. Of course, she would be worried. He couldn't imagine the pain that Pippa must be going through and how she would get through it. At least he would now have a chance to find out what was going on and how he could possibly help.

“What is it? What has happened to her? What are they going to do?” Charlie asked.

“They have declared that she be locked in her room. She is barely allowed to leave. Even for meals, they bring her the food, but she eats very little of it, for her heart aches with how much she misses you. Oh, Mr Thomas, you cannot imagine what she is suffering because of her love for you,” Lady Andrews said.

Charlie’s breath caught for his grief was so strong. This was even worse than he had imagined. Discovering that Pippa was being held as a prisoner was more devastating than he had anticipated. He imagined her up there in her room, unable to breathe the fresh air, unable to enjoy the outdoors or indulge in the brightness of the day. She deserved freedom but was unable to obtain it.

“I tell you this not to make you feel guilty, but because it is important for you to know there is nothing to be done. In a few short weeks, she will be married off to Lord Ganton. He believes that she is content to marry him and that her refusal was simply out of an effort to be coy. That is what her mother told him. They finalised all the arrangements, and nothing can stop it. I am sorry, Mr Thomas. I knew that you should be made aware of it all. Pippa loves you, but she cannot be yours,” Lady Andrews said.

“I must be able to rescue her somehow,” he replied, unable to accept this resolution. It was entirely unfair. It was wrong. They could not force her to do this.

“You cannot. Her window is permanently shut. The trellis has been removed. Her mother would never allow her to marry a man without wealth or a title and, I fear, you have neither of those things. No matter how unfair it may be, that is the end of it, Mr Thomas. You and my cousin may not spend your lives together. No matter what,” she



said.

Charlie couldn't accept such a future. He needed to see Pippa and tell her that he was still thinking of her, that he still loved her. There was no reason to let her go along believing that he had forgotten her just because they were apart.

"Have you had the opportunity to see her, and will you again soon?" Charlie asked.

"Indeed, I have. And I shall see her again tomorrow. I spent as much time as I could with her yesterday, but she barely spoke, and I knew that I was not helping," she confessed.

"I understand. But if you will, please tell her that you saw me and that I love her with all my heart. Tell her that, should I find a way, I will come to her," he said.

"Mr Thomas, I dare not say something like that to her. Have you any idea how difficult this has been for her? Have you any idea how grieved she would be if you do not come to her at once? There is no chance of rescuing Pippa. None at all. And you will not gain the approval of her mother and father. I fear that you have no choice in the matter," Lady Andrews said.

"But I will do whatever it takes," he said.

Lady Andrews appeared frustrated for a moment, but she looked away as though considering her predicament. As Charlie attempted to read her, he sensed that she was quite stricken. She seemed to want to help

them, but it was as though she felt torn.

Charlie didn't know who held her commitment the most, and he wondered if she cared enough for Pippa to try and fight for them. Then again, he knew that her loyalty to Pippa could be the very thing that would lead her to sabotage the relationship. So many people of her class would not understand a love like the one between Charlie and Pippa. She might believe that it was against Pippa's best interest.

"Are you able to get me a letter tomorrow? Have it sent to me, and I shall pass it along to her. You may tell her whatever you wish in that letter and I may rest assured that I am not responsible for the commitments you make," Lady Andrews said.

"Yes," he answered quickly. "Yes, I can get you a letter for her. Thank you, Lady Andrews. I assure you that you shall not regret this decision. I will do whatever I must."

"Yes, that is what I fear," she replied dryly. "Nevertheless, I want you to remember that this is not going to be easy. Whatever the outcome, the two of you will never have a simple road ahead. Society will not accept you."

"I care nothing for society," Charlie replied.

"But society will care about you. If you steal away one of the precious daughters of nobility, society shall never forgive you," she warned.

Charlie swallowed, knowing how right she was. He would pay the price for this. Lord Ganton would see him ruined if her mother and

father did not do so first.

But there was one other thing that Charlie wanted for Pippa. It was something small and simple, but it mattered to him far more than his own reputation. If she could not leave her room, he knew that she was without music.

“I would ask that you do one more thing for me,” he said to Lady Andrews.

“That is very brave of you to think you may ask for another favour,” she replied.

“I understand that, but it is not for me. It is for Lady Pippa,” he said.

“Then I shall hear the request,” she replied, looking intently at him.

“Would you be so kind as to play my songs for her? I imagine that she can hear the pianoforte from her room, although I know not how far she is from where it is at. Do you think she would hear?” he asked.

“*Your* songs? So is that where the mysterious sheet music has been coming from?” she asked with a gentle laugh.

“Indeed, I wrote them for her,” he answered.

“I shall do as you ask. Her room is just above the parlour and down the hall a little. I expect that she shall hear it,” Lady Andrews replied.

Charlie sighed with relief, grateful that he could send Pippa a reminder of his affections.

“I am most grateful,” Charlie said.

“And I am most in a hurry,” she replied. “Therefore, I shall depart, and I ask that you tell no one of this meeting, other than your friends who undoubtedly know already.”

“You have my word,” he replied.

“Very well. Goodbye, Mr Thomas.”

With that, Charlie quickly exited the coach and disappeared into the night. He had a letter to write. It would not rescue Pippa at once, but if he could give her the slightest hint of hope, that was all that mattered.

## Chapter 32

Pippa was desperate to find a way of escape, but nothing came to mind. At one point, she envisioned herself rushing past a maid who brought her food, throwing herself out the door and racing down the stairs and outside before she could be stopped.

It was a silly notion, but she could hardly help herself. So eager she was to break free that Pippa thought she might even use a silver candlestick to break the glass of her window and jump down from the balcony. But she knew she would not land with any grace. And if she were to try and lower herself with bed linens, she would have no luck. The shattering glass would be heard, and she would be caught in an instant.

No, indeed, there were no avenues by which she could free herself.

Lying on her bed, barely able to find the energy to move, Pippa wondered if she would ever find joy again. It seemed as though nothing would ever bring her happiness so long as she was forced to live like this.

But suddenly, a sound rose from beneath her. Pippa gasped and sat up, her heart lurching with hope. She heard the first song Charlie had ever written for her. It was playing from the pianoforte, and she couldn't understand who might be sitting down there. Who would have thought to play it for her?

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she listened, thinking about Charlie and how much he meant to her. She missed him with all her heart and would have given all she had at that moment to be by his

side.

The music continued to play, and once the song concluded, the next began. Eyes closed and a gentle, sad smile on her lips, Pippa listened and began to sway with the music. She clutched a pillow in her arms as she sat, comforting herself with what little peace she had left.

She allowed herself to imagine that Charlie was the one playing. Although she knew it was impossible, she gave herself permission to simply dream about it, to dream that he had come for her and that he was going to be the one to rescue her, after all. Even if it was unrealistic, she longed for it. She sighed, trying to will it into being.

For half an hour, Charlie's songs filled her ears. She strained her ears in the parts that were played softly and inhaled the joy of those played loudly. But when the final song ended, Pippa felt the weight of reality once more.

She yearned to hear more of those songs, to feel the nearness of Charlie once more. Soon, however, she heard the light footsteps of a woman coming down the hall, and she wondered who might be playing these tricks on her.

The key turned in the lock from the other side, and Elizabeth stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

“Pippa ...”

“Elizabeth? Was that you playing?” she asked, realising that, perhaps, Elizabeth had simply been playing music for her own entertainment

and had found the sheet music there.

“It was. He asked me to play those songs for you,” Elizabeth said, smiling at her with compassion.

“Ch-Charlie? You spoke with him?”

“I did, indeed. And Pippa, I am glad that I was able to give you something you would enjoy. I know that none of this has been easy for you. I know that it has been entirely unfair. Still, I do hope that you will listen and that you will heed my warnings. Your mother and father have no intention of releasing you from here. They are going to have Lord Ganton over tomorrow evening, I believe, but they will tell him that you have come down with a chill,” Elizabeth told her.

“But why?” she asked in confusion.

“They want him to believe that all is well, that you are still content to marry him. He believes your mother,” Elizabeth said.

“How could he be such a fool as to think I was lying about not wanting to marry him when he proposed? Why would I be coy if I wanted it and so did he?” Pippa asked.

“Because young women are *supposed* to be coy. He believes it because he knows that we are trained thusly. He knows that your mother desires you to be a proper young woman, which means that you cannot appear too eager. Still, I do wonder if he is only trying to fool himself because he likes you,” Elizabeth said.

“He likes Lady Anna as well. He ought to pursue her instead,” Pippa said.

“Regardless of that, I think he has made a firm decision. He intends to marry you, whether you think it wise or not,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa was more desperate than ever to get away. She liked Lord Ganton, but only as a friend. She had no feelings for him on a romantic notion. It appeared to her that he thought her a sensible, beneficial choice. There was certainly no more love for him than there was for her. Of that, Pippa was certain.

“What am I to do, Elizabeth? How can I get out of this horrid situation? I want nothing more than to spend my life with Charlie, but I have no way of getting out of here to be with him. What shall I do? Who is going to help me?” Pippa asked, her heart surging with pain.

“Calm yourself, Pippa. I wish I had an answer for you, but there is nothing I can think of that would quell your mother’s desire for more wealth and power,” Elizabeth said softly.

“So I am forced to be separated from the man I love for the rest of my life? I may never find the happiness of love and care for which I am yearning?”

Elizabeth hesitated and drew out a piece of paper. She looked up at Pippa with caution, and Pippa eyed her with curiosity in return.



“What is it?”

“I have something I have been instructed to give you,” Elizabeth said.

“Is it from Charlie? What did he say? When did you see him?” Pippa asked, realising that if he had asked Elizabeth to play the pianoforte, they must have spoken very recently.

“I do not wish you to have false hope, Pippa. The truth is as you know it. Your mother and father shall never concede to let you spend your life with him. But I know that he is very determined, as are you. If, by some miracle, the two of you find a way to be together, it would truly be unexpected. But it is clear to me that he wishes to try,” Elizabeth told her.

Pippa was speechless for a moment. Charlie was still trying? He still had hope as well? What was going to happen if her mother and father got in the way of it?

“Here. He sent this for you. I hope that you understand the limitations the two of you shall face. Still, I think that it would be wise for you to read the letter and decide for yourself. I, myself, have not read it, but I imagine I know what he has said. Most assuredly, he wishes to find a way to be together,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa took the letter right away and unfolded it, desperate for any news she could find from the man she loved.

*My Darling Pippa,*

*Words fail me as I write you this letter. Although I know that it must be written, that it is my only way of reaching you, I feel that I am a fool for having any hope that you are going to read it and that we shall find some sort of resolution for our current quandary.*

*I want nothing more than to spend my life with you, and I have every intention of working as hard as I can to make that possible. Although I fear that I am a weak man who is incapable of such a feat, I intend to try.*

*Your aunt told me that you have been locked away, and I cannot express the depths of my grief. But that was nothing compared to when she told me that you are not eating or taking care of yourself. Please, darling, stay strong. Your life is very dear to me, and I would not be able to go on if you were lost because of this.*

*I beg you, look after your health. Ensure that you at least look out those locked windows each day and see the world outside because you will find it again.*

*I have not given up hope that we might be together, but I wish you happiness regardless of our success or failure. Know that I will not stop fighting until the very last moment. If, however, you are married off, and you begin a new life with Lord Ganton, I implore you to find some happiness with him.*

*Until that day, know that I am seeking an opportunity to come and rescue you. Know that I am trying to find a way that we might convince your mother and father to have mercy on us. You and I were made for one another, Pippa. We belong together. I shall not cease to believe that, nor shall I allow the world to tell me otherwise.*

*I am yours forever. No matter what we face, I shall be here, thinking of you.*

*With love,*

*Charlie*

Pippa's heart melted as she read his words, thinking how lovely they were and how wonderful it was to hear from Charlie. Even if this was not how she might have wanted to reconnect with him, it was a wonder to have such an opportunity. She was overcome by her joy, knowing that he was still thinking of her, that he wanted to be with her.

"I can see from the look on your face that he really is still fighting to be with you. However, I saw something else. Did he say something to upset you?" Elizabeth asked.

Pippa shook her head.

"No, I am not upset. It is just that ... he told me that he wishes for my happiness even if it is with Lord Ganton. Still, he promised that he would fight to be with me, that he would do all he could until the day I marry Lord Ganton. He is going to try and prevent it," Pippa said, trying to cling to that hope.

Nevertheless, she could hear the doubt creeping into her own voice. Although she wanted to believe that Charlie would manage to achieve

this, she knew how unrealistic it was. How could he possibly find a way for them to be together? It made no sense. It simply was not possible.

Her mother and father would not let her leave the room.

But what if she really did try and escape? Even now, the door was unlocked. Elizabeth was in here. And could she not convince her dearest friend to let her leave?

“If you wish, you may,” Elizabeth said quietly, following Pippa’s gaze towards the door.

It startled Pippa to be caught like that and have someone read her face with such ease.

“You would be in grave trouble,” Pippa said.

“Yes, I would. That is a sacrifice I would be willing to make,” Elizabeth said.

“Truly?”

“Truly,” Elizabeth confirmed.

Pippa considered it for a moment, thinking how easy it would be to

slip out of her room. She would struggle to get outside, however. Perhaps she could hide in another room until dark.

Other rooms had balconies and trellises. Or she could wait until all others had gone to sleep and go out the servants' quarters. Of course, her mother or father might come to see her that night and find her gone. They would search until they found her.

"What do you think? Will you try to go?" Elizabeth asked, clearly uncertain and worried by the thought.

Pippa didn't want to get Elizabeth into trouble. She knew that it would be selfish. She looked her friend in the eye and tried to find the words.

"I shall simply tell them that I forgot to lock the door. I have come to see you hundreds, if not thousands, of times in our lives. How am I to be in the habit of locking you in?" Elizabeth asked, quite reasonably.

"I cannot allow you to be in trouble on my behalf," Pippa said.

"What would they do to me?" Elizabeth asked with a laugh. "I am to be married soon. And I do not live here. Your father cannot scold me like I am a child. Go, Pippa. You must go."

With the realisation that freedom was in her grasp at last, Pippa stood from the bed, smiled at her aunt, and rushed to the door. She turned the knob and swung the door open.

And shut it immediately.

“What is it?” Elizabeth asked.

“My mother ...”

“She is out there?”

“At the end of the hall,” Pippa replied softly. “She was facing away and had a book in her hands, but she has pulled a chair to the top of the stairs. It seems as though she trusts no one else to watch me. Not a maid and certainly not you.”

“Oh, Pippa. I am so sorry,” Elizabeth said sympathetically.

Pippa knew at that moment that, whatever hope she’d tried to have, she would never get out of this on her own. She was desperate, and she had no one in the home to save her.

Indeed, Charlie was the only one who could find a way out of this.

“Well, perhaps it was for the best,” Elizabeth said.

Pippa looked at her with confusion, and she could see how torn Elizabeth was. As much as Pippa wanted to believe that Elizabeth was

there as her ally, she had to recognise how difficult it would be for her aunt if she had run off. She saw the relief in Elizabeth's eyes.

It was kind of her to offer Pippa the chance, but it was clear that she preferred it this way.

And now, Pippa knew she would not only be fighting against her mother and even her father, but she would also be fighting against her dearest friend. If she were going to chase after this love in her heart, she would have to be willing to sacrifice everything.

Could she do it? Could she really let go of everything she had once held dear? Or would she find the cost too great? Would she let go of Charlie for the sake of everything she already knew?

## Chapter 33

Charlie was shocked to see Lady Andrews at his door once more, but he expected that the shock would wane if this continued.

“Forgive me this intrusion, Mr Thomas, but may we speak again?” Lady Andrews asked, stepping inside without an invitation. She obviously had intent business, and Charlie was not going to stop her from whatever purpose had brought her here. He did not think such a thing would even be possible, for her determination was so evident.

“Y-yes, of course,” he replied, getting out of her way as she made herself comfortable on the chaise.

“Thank you. We have some very important business to discuss. That, and I have another letter for you from my niece. She was very happy to see the letter from you, although I think she was grieved that you suggested she ought to find happiness if forced to marry Lord Ganton. I, however, was pleased by that and found that I trust you more after hearing of it,” Lady Andrews said.

Charlie wasn’t quite sure how to respond. He had meant it when he wrote it. He truly wanted Pippa happy, no matter whom she married. Even if he was not a part of her life, he couldn’t bear the idea that she was sad or that she would continue wishing that they could be together.

Nevertheless, he didn’t know how to react to Lady Andrews and her presence in the house. Charlie was quite sure that she had a further reason than just delivering the letter, but he still found her somewhat ... intimidating. She was very kind and genteel but he sensed that she



was also fiercely protective of Pippa, and he was always worried about saying the wrong thing in her presence.

She said that he had gained her trust somewhat, but still Charlie was not sure if that was enough. Would she be content to help them further?

“I gave Pippa your letter, and we attempted for her to escape. Unfortunately, that attempt was foolish, and her mother was still lurking and waiting. I assure you that I was not aware she would be doing so, nor that she would make such a brazen effort to prevent Pippa from this happiness,” she began.

“Still, I suppose it was foolish of me to be surprised. She is not a kind woman, Mr Thomas. You need to be prepared that you cannot show weakness if you truly intend to fight for a future with Pippa. You must be ready for battle with a woman who would see your head struck from your shoulders if she must.”

“And how am I to fight against her? What can I possibly do if she is only going to strike me down?” Charlie asked, scoffing with hopelessness.

“Nothing. You can do nothing. Which is why you would be far better off trying to find a different ally,” Lady Andrews said.

“In Pippa’s father?” he asked.

Lady Andrews sighed.

"I cannot rightly suggest that as it would be equally foolish, but if I am going to encourage any sort of hope in either you or my niece, then I suppose that is what I would be most inclined to suggest. My brother is at least somewhat softer than his wife. Pippa and I have discussed this at length, and I shall do my part as best I am able, but you need to understand that he is not likely to be swayed either. Just because he is a kinder man than the woman he married does not mean he is going to listen," she warned.

"I have given him no reason to," Charlie confessed. Although he regretted it now, Lord Bregman had no reason to trust Charlie, and everything he had done had been in his own, selfish interest. He had never stopped to think about what might be best for Lord Bregman and his family.

"Exactly so. You were a fool to try and pursue Pippa without his consent, although I do understand it. He would never have approved, and you merely did what you thought most reasonable. Nevertheless, you must understand that I will have a limited part in this," she said.

"What do you mean by that?" Charlie asked.

But Lady Andrews evaded the question, and Charlie started to wonder if, perhaps, he had overestimated her willingness to assist them.

"Here is Pippa's letter. As with yours, I have not read it," she said with a promise.

Charlie took the letter from her and, although he was excited for another chance to hear from Pippa, he also thought about how much

of their time together had been spent through secret notes and his songs for her. He wondered if they would ever freely interact and speak together without worrying about being caught.

For the moment, it seemed painfully unlikely. All he could do was find the hope of receiving her letter and trust that, in time, they would meet again.

Charlie unfolded the letter and smiled when he saw Pippa's handwriting there, reminded that there was still some beauty of her to obtain.

*My Dearest Charlie,*

*You said in your letter that words failed you. Allow me to echo your sentiment. What can be said in the midst of what has happened? And how can I express how happy I was at receiving your letter when there is still so much for us to grieve?*

*I wish I knew how to get through this season, but there is so little good to see in it when I know that we are separated. You are the most important person to me in this world, but you are also the one person I am unable to be near.*

*When I think about what life has thrown our way, I wonder if we were simply never meant to find an easy path to love. Nevertheless, I have to hold onto the belief that we will find our way to one another.*

*I should also like to echo the other sentiment you gave. Should we*

not find ourselves in a happy union with one another, I want you to find happiness elsewhere. But know that I have no intention of marrying Lord Ganton. No matter what, I will not be his wife. I cannot marry a man I do not love with all my heart, and I simply do not love him. As good a man as he is, he will never be my husband.

I am keeping my eyes open for a chance to escape. I had a window this evening, or so I thought. My mother anticipated this, and she stayed in the path so that I might not be able to find my freedom. Much to my dismay, she achieved this goal, and I remain locked in my room.

Elizabeth is bringing you this letter because she is willing to aid us in some way, but I confess that I doubt the extent to which she will help. Although she gave me the opportunity to run this evening, I saw the doubt in her eyes. I saw the guilt as well. She loves my father dearly. When their mother and father passed away, he raised her. Because of this, I expect she will reconsider just how much she will do for us.

As for our future, I am going to continue both pleading and reasoning with my father. I think he may be swayed, although my mother never shall. Perhaps, if I can convince him, he shall make the firm decision, and she will have no choice but to go along with it.

I expect it shall never go this way, but I am telling you because it is the only hope I have left for us.

The most likely outcome we may expect is that we run away together and pray that we are not discovered. This is the thing I am preparing for and trying to configure. As I am able, I will get you more of my plan. That is, I do hope to have a plan eventually.

*If you are willing, I am as well. No matter how hard it may be, I will try to find a way to come to you.*

*Yours Always,*

*Pippa*

Charlie was a bundle of thoughts and emotions upon reading these words. He knew Pippa would try, and he trusted that she would make every effort, but he was deeply worried for her in doing so. Her mother would, most assuredly, discover them. Not only that, but when she did, she was likely to either disown Pippa or put her in an even worse situation than that in which she already found herself.

“Well?” Elizabeth asked.

“May I write back to her?” he asked.

Elizabeth looked at him keenly, her eyes slightly narrowed but more in a calculating manner than an angry one. She did not reply, so Charlie got up and went to the desk where he could start writing.

*My Darling Pippa,*

*I long for the day when we do not need to speak through letters. It grieves me to know that this is the only chance we have to share our hearts with one another when, in truth, my heart simply wishes to be*

*near yours.*

*Having read your letter, I have a great many thoughts that must be sorted through. But the one I know is the most important to you is an answer to what you have proposed. In that, I must heartily reply that I would be perfectly pleased to run away with you. I, too, shall be working on a plan that might help us escape and be together.*

*While we were never promised an easy life amid everything that has happened, a life with you would be worth whatever the stakes may be. I want nothing more than to spend my days with you beside me, whatever that means for us.*

*So yes, my dear. Yes, I will find a way to be with you. I will make the sacrifices necessary to ensure that we can spend our days with one another. And if you truly feel the same as you said you have, we will find a way.*

*Yours,*

*Charlie*

Leaning back, Charlie sighed and smiled to himself. There was still hope yet. He had to believe it.

But when he turned around, he saw Lady Andrews still eyeing him curiously. As he stood and came back to her, his insecurity in her presence returned, and Charlie was beginning to wonder if she was really there to aid them ...

Or if she was a spy.

“You said that you did not read Pippa’s letter, nor my first one. Is that the truth?” he asked.

A slight curve of her lip told him that he had asked the very wrong question. At once, he regretted it and wished that he had chosen instead to trust her. Now, he had exposed himself in that he wanted to hide something from her which would only bring suspicion upon himself. It had been a very foolish thing, but in his desperation to be with Pippa again, he could do nothing more.

“Why do you need to know? I assure you that I did not, but the fact that you are curious makes me even more suspicious of you and your intentions,” she said.

“And why is that?” Charlie asked, his heart beating a little bit faster.

“Because if you are so devoted to your secrets, it assures me that you have something to hide. And if you have something to hide, I have a reason to be concerned,” she said.

Charlie took a deep breath.

“You already know everything I am trying to hide,” he said.

Lady Andrews leaned forward, and this time, her eyes shifted into a blatant, amused glare.

“If that is true,” she said, “you will not mind if I ask you a question.”



## Chapter 34

Charlie hated being under the gaze of this woman, knowing how important it was to have her blessing and knowing how little she trusted him. But what could he do? How could he possibly make her see that he was a good man and that he would make Pippa happy?

“A question?” he asked. His stomach flipped on itself, dreading whatever it was that she was going to ask. He had a terrible feeling that she was about to expose him somehow, that she was soon to bring him to face his errors when all he wanted now were solutions.

“Mr Thomas, I would not have helped you this far if I did not think you were a good man. I know how happy you make Lady Pippa, and that is very important to me. But I also know that you have the power to make my brother very sad,” she told him.

Charlie looked away, realising what she was saying. It was true. If he stole Pippa away, Lord Bregman would grieve her desperately. He would be distraught beyond words at the loss of his daughter to some fool who thought he deserved her.

“I need to know the truth before I take this letter to Pippa. Are you planning to run away?” she asked.

The outright question took Charlie by surprise. This was not a woman willing to play coy or be subtle to find out what she wanted to know. She wanted the truth and was clearly willing to ask him beyond his comfort to find out.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, embarrassed by the high pitch of his question.

"I want to know if you are going to run away with my niece. I need to know if you intend to break my brother's heart. You know that he loves her. You know that she is everything to him. You have seen the woman he married, and that is, surely, enough for you to understand that he is a man in desperate need of someone to love," she said.

"And you think that I am going to make his life more difficult by taking Pippa away from him," Charlie said.

"I believe that is your intention, yes. Now, I need to know directly from you whether or not I am right. You see, if you tell me honestly, I will at least have the responsibility to make my own decision. If, however, you choose to lie, and I make a mistake, you will have made a fool out of me, and you will have made a selfish choice that breaks the heart of my brother and leaves my niece unprotected. I would lose all respect and trust that I have placed upon you," she said.

Charlie slowly inhaled, understanding the gravity of this and the fact that it would be a terrible harm if he were not careful. How could he tell her the truth?

But more than that, how could he now lie?

"I will ask you one last time and, this time, I expect you to answer. Are you going to take Pippa away?"

The question hung in the air, and Charlie swallowed, screwing his courage to do the right thing. The honest thing.

“Indeed,” he replied, exhaling with the effort of his confession. “We are planning to run away together.”

Lady Andrews paused once more and chewed her lip before looking up at him again. Whatever thoughts she was calculating, she didn’t seem to trust him enough yet to accept him at his word.

“I am grateful for your honesty. Now, I should like you to hear mine. I am willing to carry goodbye letters between the two of you, but I cannot plot against my brother. No matter how much I long to see you and Pippa happy, no matter how much I want to help true love find victory, I cannot do that to Colin. He has done far too much to raise me and look after me,” she said.

Charlie’s heart sank. What could he do now? Lady Andrews had been his only hope. She was the only one who could have helped him and Pippa communicate and help them plan their escape.

Pippa had been right. They should not have put so much faith in her as their only asset and ally. She was a good woman, one who understood the importance of loyalty.

Unfortunately, that loyalty was the very thing that stopped her from aiding Charlie and Pippa. Now, he was going to have to figure out a better way forward. And yet, he knew in his heart there was no better way.

"I am sorry, Lady Andrews. I know that you are right. It would be unfair to your brother if I took away his only daughter, if I stripped him of his right to look after her and have a say in her future. I know that I care for nothing but the chance for Pippa and me to be together, and I know that I have gone about it all in the wrong way," he said.

"But I am desperate. I know not how else to do this. If I want to spend my life with her, which I do, how can I possibly find a way to make it happen? Everything is against us. There is no hope, and it would seem that every little bit we have had has been stripped away," Charlie continued.

"What more is left for us? How can we possibly keep fighting when everyone keeps knocking us over?"

Lady Andrews did not meet his gaze, and Charlie felt quite certain that he knew her answer. She was telling him, without having to say it aloud, that he had no choice but to give up.

"Please, Lady Andrews. Please. I know that you do not wish to hurt your brother, and I understand that it is a fool's errand, but what other choice have I? You were allowed to wait for the man you wished to marry, a man you love. Can your niece not have the same luxury? Would you deny her that?" Charlie asked.

At that, she looked up at him, her face screwed with concern and understanding and guilt all pushed together.

"I know that I have been given a gift that few others are afforded. Still, I must beg you to consider what you are asking of me. Please remember that there is a fine line between reasoning with someone and manipulating them, and you are walking that line right now,"

Lady Andrews said, a gentle warning in her tone.

Charlie could hear that she was also full of guilt. He hadn't meant to manipulate her, but she really did seem to be more understanding of their plight now that he had made his case more strongly.

"I am desperate to marry her," Charlie said.

"How much time have the two of you even spent together?" she asked, incredulous that he should be so in love.

"We met on several nights and walked together for hours, sharing our thoughts and hopes. Sometimes, we watched the sun rise in the distance as we raced to get Pippa back before she was found missing. And I would leave her the music whenever I could, but that was even before we started spending our time with one another," he confessed.

"You left music for her in her window, correct?" she asked.

"Indeed, I did. It was how my father wooed my mother, and I always hoped to find a woman worth wooing in such a way. So when I first saw her, I knew that she was the one. And when we first spoke, I was inspired. I quickly began writing songs for her, putting the notes to paper with the awareness that I could only capture the smallest portion of her beauty. Nevertheless, it was worth every hour spent at the pianoforte," he said, thinking back to those late nights with Nathan coming out to beg him to stop playing so the rest of them could sleep.

Charlie had torn himself away from the piano and would go to his

room, putting notes on paper from his head and then practicing it in the morning to see if it truly sounded as good as he thought. Making changes as necessary, he would have a finished piece that told the story of his love for Pippa.

And now, here he was, imagining the heartbreaking chords that he would need to share the tale of how they were separated, of how they were never allowed to be together no matter how hard they fought and tried to make a life with one another. Dissonant chords would break each stage of joy until, at last, the song would crumble to pieces with a jumble of angry notes and minor chords.

“That is a very pretty story,” Lady Andrews said.

“Well, it would be far prettier if there was a chance of my repeating it. However, it would seem there is no chance of that. It would seem that myself and the woman I love will never have the opportunity for such joy or love. I am doomed only to think of her and remember that once upon a time, we had those nights together. Once upon a time, I was able to write music for her and dream of a day in which she would be able to listen and dance and know that she was loved,” he told her with a heavy heart.

Lady Andrews still seemed to be thinking about the situation, and Charlie only wanted her to tell him what to do, to give him some resolution. He knew it was foolish to think that she would do anything to aid them, but more than that, it was foolish for him to even consider that she might want to. She had already warned him that she would give him no aid in helping Pippa escape with him. Whatever help she had offered, she felt guilty for.

“Pippa told me that you gave her the chance to run,” he said. “In her letter, she mentioned it.”

“And you are reminding me of this because you hope you can appeal to that part of me?” she asked.

“I am telling you because I hope that you will remember why you thought to help us. There had to be a reason. Why did you consider it then, but not now? What has changed?”

“What changed was the fact that I felt such relief when Pippa could not escape. I was relieved that my betrayal of my brother came to no fruition. I realised that I would never have forgiven myself if I allowed Pippa to leave and if I had to answer to Colin for it,” she said.

“Then what is it you expect of me now? I have told you that we are making plans to go. Are you going to tell your brother?” Charlie asked.

“That depends. Are you still going to try and escape, or will you rewrite your letter and tell Pippa to have a happy life without you?” she challenged him.

Charlie thought about what she was asking. Could he do it? Could he really write to Pippa and tell her to go on ahead and marry Lord Ganton, that she ought to have a good life with him and find joy in that marriage? What would he do if she accepted his words? Would she actually proceed forward?

It would likely be the best thing for her. She would not have to worry about money or the loss of her family if she married Lord Ganton. She could spend her days in luxury and be provided for. Although Charlie would do his best, they would never have the same sort of finery that

Lord Ganton could afford.

Still, he was not sure how he could let her go. She meant too much to him. Was he able to release her into that life? Was he able to let her go?

“How am I supposed to do that?” Charlie asked, unable to bring himself to answer definitively.

Lady Andrews smiled once more and gave a little shrug.

“I suppose that is your answer. And, bearing that in mind, I think I have an idea.”



## Chapter 35

Perhaps it was a mistake, but it was the best option Charlie had.

Lady Andrews had made the suggestion with her own hesitant hope, but Charlie chewed his lip, wondering if they were both being fools and if all this was a mistake that could have been avoided if only he had chosen to lie to her and run away with Pippa as their letters had planned.

Nevertheless, this was the decision that Charlie had made. He thought that Lady Andrews must be the best person to go to when it came to a resolution, and her idea sounded wise—although not easy.

Charlie stepped forward onto the grounds of the estate and screwed his courage. This was his last chance. If he messed it up, he would never see Pippa again. Lady Andrews already had the letter in place to give Pippa if all this went wrong.

He had written the letter to tell Pippa that the plan failed and that he would love her forever but that the best thing for her was to move on and live a happy life. He told her, in the letter, that her aunt was right, that they could not do this to her father.

They could not make him suffer. But he also told her that no matter what, as long as he lived, he would remember her and think of her each day with love and affection in his heart. He promised that he would still write music for her and that, some days, she would attend a ball and hear a new song only to find that it was named after her.

Indeed, Lady Andrews would give this letter to Pippa, but only if they now failed. If, however, they managed to succeed in this impossible task, he would get to see Pippa again, and they just might have a future after all.

He didn't want to have too much hope for that. There were great hurdles to jump over, but when Charlie looked up to the window, he saw Pippa in her room. She was not looking out the window, and he knew that she would not see him unless she happened to glance his way, but his heart seemed to dance in his chest at the sight of her there, with her blonde hair free and flowing rather than pulled into its usual bun. He could not see her as clearly as he would have liked, but even this blurry, far-off view of the back of her head was a wonder for him.

It renewed his determination and his vow to himself that he would fight to be with her. He had to reach her somehow. And if her father turned him away at once, Charlie figured the least he could do would be to throw a small stone up at her window when he left, just for one final gaze at her face.

Charlie reached the door, and it opened a moment later, with the maid looking at him curiously, as though she might know who he was but was not entirely sure.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I am here to speak with Lord Bregman," he said, as boldly as he was able.

"And who might you be?" she asked him with further hesitation.

“You may tell him that Mr Charles Thomas has come and that Lady Andrews is expecting me,” he replied.

At this, her eyes widened. Indeed, she knew who he was. The household staff always knew the best gossip, and Charlie was prepared for this. He had been afraid that she would simply refuse him admittance, and he would have to beg her to confirm with Lady Andrews before she would speak with Lord Bregman, but at least she seemed ready to go to her master instead.

“One moment,” she replied.

The maid closed the estate door, and Charlie waited outside until, a few minutes later, she reappeared. The door opened wider, and she gave a curtsey, to which he replied with a bow.

“I shall present you to the duke,” she said, leading Charlie down the hall.

Before they even reached the door, Charlie could hear a man’s voice, as well as Elizabeth’s. They were arguing, and Elizabeth was speaking in defence of meeting Charlie.

“But he is here to explain himself. Is that not what you wanted all along?” she asked.

“How could I want anything to do with that foolish boy? He has

disrespected me at every turn,” Lord Bregman was saying.

“Simply hear him out,” Lady Andrews said, just as they reached the door.

The maid knocked on the door, and Charlie’s heart leapt into his throat. He could hardly believe he was going to present himself before a duke and ask for the man’s daughter’s hand in marriage.

“Come in,” Lord Bregman grumbled.

The maid entered and presented Charlie.

“Mr Thomas, Your Grace,” she said.

“Thank you. You may leave us,” Lord Bregman said, still not looking at Charlie. He seemed to be avoiding eye contact at all costs, which did not surprise Charlie in the least. He wondered if he would even have a chance at speaking directly with Lord Bregman or if the duke would just turn away from Charlie and face the windows or the wall instead.

“Will you be requiring tea, Your Grace?” the maid asked.

“No,” Lord Bregman replied with a harsh refusal. It was clear that Charlie was unwelcome. But Charlie had anticipated this as well. He was not there for tea or even brandy. He was there to beg and plead with a man who was unlikely to listen to a word he had to say.

At last, with the maid gone and the door closed, Lord Bregman turned to Charlie. Lady Andrews stood behind him with a hopeful smile on her face.

“Elizabeth, do you intend to remain here, or shall I be allowed a private audience with this audacious young man?” Lord Bregman asked, his eyes full of fury.

“I shall depart, but only until I hear yelling. If I must return, I shall,” she replied light-heartedly.

It seemed to Charlie that she was trying to get her brother to relax a bit, but that seemed very unlikely to happen.

As Lady Andrews left, Charlie realised that, once more, he had no allies available to him. Lord Bregman was looking at him with contempt, and there was nothing to convince Charlie that he would make it through this meeting without losing a limb.

“Lord Bregman—”

“I shall begin, boy. You do not address me unless I give you leave to do so,” Lord Bregman ordered with a growling voice.

Charlie was silent at once, standing awkwardly, trying to remain patient and motionless. He had no idea what he was doing, but he was going to attempt it nonetheless.

“Now, when I speak, I expect you to hear me very clearly. I expect you to show me the respect due to a man in my position. And I do not mean as a duke and a nobleman. I mean as the father of the woman you have been meeting with against all propriety and custom. I am referring to the fact that you have dishonoured me in every way by trying to steal away time with my only daughter and inciting her to disobedience,” he said, his face red and his nostrils flared.

Charlie swallowed his fear and searched for that brazenness that had sent him to Pippa’s window in the first place. While he did not want to do anything that might jeopardise his situation, he hoped to find his courage and give himself a chance to convince Lord Bregman that he was a worthy man.

“I understand that you love my daughter and, because I know she loves you, I am willing to give you a chance to explain yourself. However, you must know that I do not trust you and that I cannot abide a young fool who is willing to convince my daughter to throw away everything she has in life,” he said.

Charlie gave a single nod, waiting for Lord Bregman to give him leave to speak.

“Now, explain yourself. Tell me what it is that you want and why my sister seems to think I need to listen to you,” he instructed.

With a deep breath and straightening his back, Charlie chose to plead his case boldly.

“Lord Bregman, you are correct. I have gone about this the wrong way at every turn. I feared that you would not allow your daughter to communicate with a man of my station and, as such, I convinced Lady Pippa to see me without your knowledge or consent,” he began.

Lord Bregman’s mouth twitched, and Charlie hoped that it was a good sort of surprise. He hoped that it was the kind of surprise that a man might display when he was pleased by something.

“Lady Pippa is the most wonderful woman I have ever known, and from the first time I saw her, I knew that she was the woman with whom I wished to spend the rest of my days. I love her with all my heart,” he confessed.

“I knew that it was unlikely I would ever be allowed an opportunity to court her, so I began leaving her sheet music. I wrote songs that were inspired by her, and I left her the compositions so that she could play them. She did not know who was leaving them for her, but, in time, we met face to face again. One evening, after we had spoken a few times in public, she caught me trying to leave her another composition,” he explained, deciding that all details must be shared if he was going to do this the right way.

“Of course, your daughter was angry and frightened. But, for some reason, she did not go to you right away. She then saw me at a ball, and we spoke for the first time, aware of one another’s identities. And after that, we met in the night, repeatedly. I am telling you this so you know that I did meet with her without your consent, but also because I hope that this honesty will earn your trust when I tell you that nothing occurred between us that might compromise your daughter’s virtue,” he said, uncomfortably.

“Well, that is a relief—if it is true. Still, you know that these meetings were improper,” he said.

"I do, Your Grace. I know that, and I regret it. I wish that I had done things the proper way so that you might know I am a good and decent man who would never intentionally harm your image or that of your daughter. I was a fool, but I pursued Pippa because I loved her more than I ever thought possible. She is the most incredible woman I have ever met, and there was a part of me that thought we really could be happy and be together," he confessed.

"Why would you think that? When has it ever happened that a man of your station has married the daughter of a duke?" Lord Bregman asked.

Charlie tried not to be hurt by the question. He knew that Lord Bregman was right to ask the question and to challenge him. He had made a mistake, and it was only fair that he had to answer for it.

"To my knowledge, it has never happened. But that does not mean that it cannot," he said.

Lord Bregman scoffed and looked away. Charlie knew that this was his last chance to make things right, to convince this man that Charlie could be worthy of his daughter.

"Lady Pippa and I fell in love. I know I am but a musician, but I do well with my money, and I am very responsible with it. I can assure you that I would provide for your daughter. She may not have all the graces afforded to a duchess, but she would have a roof over her head, lovely gowns, a comfortable place to call home, and she would be well-fed. I can afford a cottage if that would be acceptable. Beyond that, she would be given all the happiness I can offer her. She loves me, no matter how much you wish she did not," Charlie said.



“And because of that, I am to give you my consent to marry her?” Lord Bregman asked, clearly not thinking it wise.

“Please, Your Grace, tell me what I must do to garner your respect and show you that I am worthy of your daughter. I will do whatever I must. I care for her more than you could ever imagine. I want to spend my life with her because I know that I can make her happy and be the man you want for her. And I know that I am worthy of more than what noblemen expect of me,” Charlie said.

“It is not possible, young man,” he said. “Even if I were to give you my approval, it would not be enough. You do not know my wife, it would seem. Ask Pippa. She will tell you. There is no chance that my wife would be willing to allow this marriage to proceed if you wished for it. She would stop you with every ounce of power that she has because she has a far stronger opinion about nobility and society than I ever shall.”

“And is that all that stops you? Is your wife the only reason you are concerned? Forgive me, Lord Bregman, but I do not understand. You are a duke and the man in charge of this family, are you not?” Charlie asked, genuinely confused. All he had ever seen from noblemen was how they ordered everyone else to do as the man might please. They told their wives what must be done, and the wives did it.

“You are young and have not had the life experience that I have, but I shall tell you something which very few men wish to confess,” Lord Bregman began.

“Our wives have much more say than we like. Just because a man is noble does not mean that he can force his family. Many try, but most

fail. Now, as I have addressed that concern, I shall once more stress that this is not only my wife's dilemma. I, myself, dislike how you went about all of this thus far," he reminded Charlie.

"But I am trying to make it right, Lord Bregman. Please, do not think me too late. I was a fool for not coming to you sooner, but I thought you would think the same as your wife, that you would not allow your daughter to marry someone like me," he said.

"And if I let go of my suspicion, do you really believe that you are worthy of my trust? Shall I believe that you can provide for Pippa? That you can look after her? That you will make her your top priority in all things?" Lord Bregman asked.

"Yes, Your Grace. In all things. She will be the one who moves me forward, the one in whom I put all my love and for whom all my efforts will strive," he vowed.

Once more, Lord Bregman looked at him with a calculating eye. Charlie straightened his posture again and waited, wondering if he had made a bigger mess of things or if he had finally found a sense of victory.

There was not much more to be said. They had gone over it repeatedly, and Charlie was tired of being apart from Pippa and constantly explaining himself. All he wanted was to see her again. And as he waited for the verdict, he wondered if she was upstairs at that very moment. Did she know that he was there? Did she know he had come for her?

Would he leave there that day with the promise of her hand? Or would he leave a defeated man, with nothing left to give him life?

## Chapter 36

Pippa was seated on her bed, wiling the day away in sadness as she had been so often lately. When she heard the key turn in the lock, she imagined it was just another maid bringing her tea or some food.

She had not heard back from Charlie since writing the letter that Elizabeth took to him, and she was beginning to wonder if Elizabeth had not made it to see him or if he hadn't wanted to say anything more. Confused and wondering what was happening in the world outside of her bedroom, she looked up as the door opened and immediately felt another wave of dismay.

"What are you doing in here? Still moping?" her mother asked, clearly annoyed.

"Please, Mother. Must you come here? You know that I do not wish to see you or speak with you. Will you not grant me some peace by leaving me alone?" Pippa asked, knowing that she was unlikely to get what she was asking for.

"Oh, hush, Pippa. You must stop with all that nonsense. Do you not know that I am here because I am your mother and I care for you? Just because you disagree with my decisions does not negate the fact that I am doing these things for your sake. I want you to have the best life possible, and you are clearly incapable of making the sort of decisions necessary to gain that life for yourself," her mother said.

Pippa was furious to listen to these things and have to face her mother at that moment. She desperately wanted to get away and forget that her mother had this rulership over her. If there were any chance she

might have at escaping, her mother was constantly setting out to ruin it.

“Why have you come? Are you here to mock me? To remind me that you have the power and I do not? To tell me that you know better than I and that love is less important than a nice title and a good deal of wealth?” Pippa asked, frustrated that she would even have to question the motives of a woman who ought to have been looking out for her daughter’s best interests.

“Really, now, Pippa. What is the matter with you? I am here to tell you that we are to have dinner with Lord Ganton this evening. Now, at first, I thought it was best we simply tell him that you had caught a chill. That way, he would not have to see you, and we would not risk you being rude to him. However, I do believe that he honestly cares for you and would wish to see you regardless. Because of that, there is nothing I can do but urge you to get dressed and make yourself presentable,” she said.

Pippa stared at her mother for a moment, angry that she would even suggest Pippa put herself in this position.

“Mother, I cannot see Lord Ganton. If I do, I shall tell him that you have lied. I shall be honest with him and tell him that, while I think he is a wonderful man, I do not love him, and I never shall,” Pippa said.

“You will do no such thing,” her mother hissed.

“You cannot force me to marry him, Mother! I will not be made his wife. I will not marry someone I do not love. You shall have to drag me down the aisle, kicking and screaming. Will he wish to marry me

then?" Pippa asked, doing all she could to make her mother reconsider.

"You will be a lady. You shall act like a lady, and you shall present yourself like a lady because that is all you have, Pippa. That is what must be done. You know as well as I do that we have little choice in our lives, and I will urge you in whatever way I must," her mother said.

"I will not marry him," she insisted again.

"And if you do not, I shall have to tell everyone to avoid hiring that young man who attempted to seduce you," her mother retorted, threatening Charlie's livelihood and reputation.

"You must leave him alone," Pippa said desperately.

"That, my dear, is up to you. Because if you continue in your folly, I shall have no choice but to tell everyone about how he continually tried to come after you, how he stalked you, how he came onto our estate grounds and attempted to take you away. I shall tell them how you screamed for me to come and rescue you from him and how we did so. Then, I shall go to the constable and urge him to arrest the young man who tried to take you away from your home," her mother said.

Pippa's skin prickled with the shock that her mother could be so cruel. Every step of the way, Pippa had seen how others came to tear down her happiness and every chance she had to be with Charlie. But this? This was sheer madness. Whatever her mother seemed to think reasonable, Pippa knew that it was sheer bitterness and a ruthless insistence upon power.

“You will ruin him if I do not do as you say?” Pippa asked, her voice quivering.

“I will do whatever I must to keep you in line, Pippa. You have one choice. If you wish that young man to continue whatever he is hoping to have in life, you must obey me. You must listen and do as you are told. You must marry Lord Ganton and forget that you ever loved another man. That is what a good woman does. She obeys her mother and father, and she remembers that she has only these choices,” her mother said.

Knowing that her mother meant the threat, Pippa understood just how dire her circumstances were. She had to ensure that Charlie could continue working, that he and the others in the quartet were not ruined because of this love. It would not be fair to them if Pippa chose to be selfish.

“I will forget Charlie,” Pippa said. “I will forget him and never see him again if you will leave him alone. But still, I cannot marry Lord Ganton.”

Her mother scoffed and shook her head.

“Am I meant to believe you?” she asked.

“Just leave him alone,” she pleaded, desperately.

But Pippa's mother shook her head, sighing in irritation once more.

"Pippa, you are going to marry Lord Ganton because he is a good man, and you are fortunate to marry a man like him," she said.

"But you also married a good man, and you do not deem yourself fortunate. You do not appreciate Father," Pippa spat back.

"I have done my duty, Pippa. No one asked me to do anything more. No one asked me to pretend that I love him or anything so foolish as that. I am doing what was expected of me, and you shall do the same. Do not be the foolish sort of child who disobeys over nonsensical reasons that ruin the family. I have worked hard to get us into the position in which we now find ourselves. I trust that you will not undo all of it," her mother said.

Pippa was overwhelmed, pushed beyond anything she had ever been through before. She could not imagine a future whereby she was continually forced to do her mother's bidding. She could not imagine a future in which she was forced to do whatever Lord Ganton insisted upon either. And she never wanted to become as bitter as her own mother was.

"Your mother and father forced you into this, did they not? Did you never dream of love?" Pippa asked, trying to appeal to her mother's youthful dreams.

"Pippa, my mother told me from a young age that there was no reason to dream of anything such as romance, and she was right. I know that now, and I am glad that I grew to understand it, just as you would be wise to do. I know that it may be difficult for you and, perhaps, I did not prepare you well enough. I never dreamt of anything like love

because they were wise enough to tell me that I would be a fool to hope for it," she replied.

"And that does not sadden you? You do not wish that you could have experienced a very different life? One with joy and romance?"

"My mother and father informed me of the important things in life. They knew that I was better off pursuing a good match that elevated my station, that provided me with finery, and that I would be able to demonstrate a firm knowledge of propriety," she answered. "Those are the things of value in this world. Not incorporeal things such as love and affection."

It was a sad reality that Pippa's mother truly believed this. No longer did Pippa think her mother cruel. For a long moment, Pippa simply looked upon her mother with pity. How sad it was that a woman should be forced to believe such a bleak lie. How sad it was that her mother actually thought she would not be worthy of something so happy as a mutual care and passion.

"I could never live like that, Mother," Pippa confessed.

"Then you must decide if you are willing to give it up for the sake of the man you claim to love or if you are going to be a fool and push beyond what you are allowed. Society will never accept any sort of love that happens between you and that boy. All will ostracise you, and you will never be welcomed in respectable circles again," her mother warned.

"But I would be happy," Pippa said.



“And you would be a pauper because he would be ruined and never again allowed to play his music. His friends would likely be in a similar position because of their association with him. I would not be averse to reminding my friends of this fact,” she threatened.

Pippa took a deep breath, recognising the consequences before her. But could she really live under the thumb of her mother?

Selfish though it was, Pippa knew she could not remain. The door to her room was open. It was a hopeless risk she was choosing to take. She could never make it outside. She would be forced back to her room. More than likely, the wedding would be moved forward. She might even be made to present herself before Lord Ganton that night regardless.

But she had to try.

Pippa ran for the door and pushed through it, out into the hall. It was such a relief to breathe in the fresh air of the home, not to feel suffocated in her own bedroom any longer. The freedom was exhilarating after nearly five days of being locked away.

“Pippa!” her mother cried, racing after her.

She turned on her mother but did not stop moving.

“Do whatever you wish to me, Mother! I will not marry a man I do not love! And if you try to do any harm to Charlie or his friends, I shall tell everyone that I loved him and that you forced me to marry

another. I shall scandalise our family by admitting to my affections. I care nothing about your insistence about propriety. If you try to make me marry Lord Ganton, if you try to harm Charlie in any way, I shall send my confession to the society pages,” Pippa threatened, walking backwards as she shouted back at her mother.

When she reached the stairs, Pippa turned, ready to run once more. But as she stepped down, Pippa looked down to the entryway where the stairs met the floor. To her utter shock, she saw her father there with Elizabeth.

And with Charlie.

## Chapter 37

“How dare you show your face in this home?” Pippa’s mother shouted.

“Enough, Mary!” her father shouted back.

All was silent, and Pippa looked around in confusion as her mother froze in place, clearly stunned by the anger released by Pippa’s father.

Never in all her life had Pippa seen her father stand firm against his wife. Never had he been willing to shout at her like this, to insist that she cease in her efforts. For a long moment, Pippa wondered what could possibly have happened to change him. But then, she looked at Elizabeth, who stood there smiling.

And then, she looked at Charlie.

His face was serene, and he had just the faintest hint of a smile as he looked at her. It was an expression of peace and trust, an expression of contentment, as though he had found a reason for them to be calm, to know that things would come together after all.

Waiting for an explanation, Pippa couldn’t imagine what had happened or why her father was suddenly shouting at her mother, but seeing the faces of Charlie and Elizabeth made her realise that whatever had happened must have resulted in good news.

Pippa's mother finally, gracefully, made her way down the stairs, past Pippa.

"Darling, why are you speaking to me in this way?" she asked tersely.

Pippa's father inhaled through flared nostrils, clearly tired of the life he had lived under her demands.

"I am speaking to you in this way because I have remained silent for years, Mary. Because I have allowed you to beat me down. I felt sorry for you, knowing that you did not love me. I knew that you could not love. You simply do not know how. So I allowed you to swell in your greed and your gossip, and I remained quiet, pitying you for the life you lived without affection and with a mother and father who were mere statues," he said.

"How dare you?" her mother asked again, this time directed at her own husband rather than Charlie.

"I dare because it is the truth and because I have been silent for far too long. I dare because we have a choice to make, Mary. We have a future that we must choose. I know that I wish that future to be one of happiness and peace. I wish for a future in which we truly enjoy being together, in which we find forgiveness for past hurts, and we move on," he said.

For a moment, Pippa's father looked at her and then at Charlie before he looked at his wife again.

"I do not believe one has a choice to fall in love," he said. "I think

love is something that happens to us. Staying in love, however? That is something we choose. That is a commitment that we make.”

“And what does that have to do with us?” her mother asked, incredulous.

“We never fell in love. We never truly cared for one another. But I no longer care about that. Because even though love never found us, I am choosing love,” he replied.

Pippa’s heart melted as she listened to her father’s words. She was so happy to see how he was treating her mother, amazed that he would make such a sacrifice of himself so that they could both be happy.

“That is foolish, and it makes no sense,” her mother retorted.

“When I tell you that I am choosing love, I tell you that I am choosing commitment, Mary. I will no longer be the man I have been. You shall not walk all over me as you have. But I shall treat you with affection, regardless of how you or I feel,” he promised.

“And why is that?”

“Because the only way for us to have a future is to make the choice to love and respect one another. I shall love you even when it is difficult, and I should very much like you to treat me with a modicum of respect if you are capable of such a thing,” he said.

“I do respect you,” Lady Mary replied.

Pippa’s father laughed sadly and shook his head.

“No, my dear. You have no respect for me. But if we are to move forward, you must find it,” he said.

“Our daughter has a chance for happiness. She has a chance for love and respect that are not forced but are mutual. She and this young man truly care for one another in such a way that we cannot stop, no matter how hard we might try. If you see how they love one another, there is no denying that they belong together. They make one another happy, and they do not even need to try to do so. They simply are,” he said.

“What of it?” her mother asked.

“Do you not envy them? Do you not think that we must allow them to pursue this so they might avoid the misery with which we have lived for all these years?” he challenged her.

Pippa looked at Charlie again and saw the tears sparkle in his eyes. She knew it then, at that moment. Her father had given him his blessing. He had really approved their match.

Looking at Charlie was already a balm to Pippa’s wounded soul. But realising that they were actually going to be able to be together was a dream come true. Her father needed to convince her mother, yes, but only in as much that he needed her to understand she had no choice in the matter. At last, Pippa’s fate was set. She would have the life she

had longed for. She would marry the man she loved and have true happiness, just like Elizabeth had always encouraged her to seek.

“Colin, you cannot honestly mean that you want to let our daughter marry a musician? You cannot mean that she should give up a future with Lord Ganton?” her mother asked in shock.

“That is precisely what I am saying,” Pippa’s father replied. “And, as it happens, I trust that Lord Ganton will be just fine. I saw how he eyed Lady Anna at the ball last week, and I have no doubt that he is going to make a fine husband for a woman like her.”

Pippa grinned, terribly relieved to hear her father acknowledge this.

“This is madness, Colin,” her mother insisted.

“Madness or not, this is my decision,” he replied.

Silence descended once more, and Pippa looked at Charlie, desperate to run to him. She had not seen him for nearly a week, and her heart ached fiercely to be close to him. Through all this, she still had not been able to go to him, and it was painful watching all this happen around them when they could not come together. If her father was going to allow them to be a match, would he not simply declare it and allow Pippa to run to the man she loved?

She waited but rather impatiently.

“Please, Colin ...” her mother said, in a quiet, defeated tone.

“No, Mary. There is no please. This is my decision. You may either accept it or you may stay in the servants’ quarters this evening,” he said.

“How could you suggest such a thing?” Lady Mary gaped.

“This is my house, Mary. This is my title and my wealth. I wish only to share them with a woman who is worthy of the honour. I no longer wish to hand them over to someone who views me only with the greed of what she might have as a result of being my wife. If you want to retain your title and your wealth, if you want to continue in being my wife, I expect you to behave like a lady and make a new choice,” he said.

“No longer are you to simply do whatever society demands. You are going to begin listening to your heart. You shall do what you can to overcome what your mother and father always told you, and you are to begin thinking about what could truly bring you happiness and joy,” he continued.

“And if you do not know what those things are, I humbly ask that you allow me the chance to show my wife what a joy life can truly be.”

Pippa had never been prouder of her father. Not only had he stood up for himself, but he was trying to better his wife’s own life, even when she had done nothing but attempt to ruin his. It was a wonderful moment, and Pippa could see that her father was pleased for having the chance to finally say what must have been welling up within him for many years.



“I ... I suppose you have given me no choice,” Pippa’s mother said.

“So you consent? You agree to a change in our life? You agree to a future in which we care for one another, in which we work hard to enjoy life together? In which we choose to be gracious to one another?” he asked.

Pippa looked closely at her mother, who appeared frightened by the response she knew must be given. And yet, Pippa knew that her mother would agree. Not only because she wanted to continue in her life of luxury. Not only because of the ultimatum she had been offered.

But because she wanted to be happy and because she wanted love. No matter how she had fought it for many years in the past, Pippa knew her mother truly wanted it, deep down. Just like everyone else. And now, at last, this was her chance to have it.

“Yes,” she replied, unable to stop the faint hint of a smile that played at her lips. “Yes, I consent to the life of happiness you wish for. And I consent to allow Pippa to marry the man of her choice.”

Without another word and unable to remain still a moment longer, Pippa rushed down the final few stairs and threw her arms around Charlie’s neck. With this simple embrace, she knew that everything she had ever hoped for was finally going to be theirs. They would be together. They would get married. They would have a future.

And they would experience the joy that had nearly been stripped away from them.

“Oh, Pippa,” he said, whispering in her ear as he held her.

Although the affection was not typical of what she might show in front of her mother and father, Pippa could not restrain herself. She stayed there, in Charlie’s arms, for a moment longer.

“Ahem,” Elizabeth said, laughing as she hinted for them to separate.

Pippa pulled herself away from Charlie, painfully and with great struggle. Still, she smiled, knowing that she would be with him for the rest of her days.

A knock sounded on the door, startling everyone as they stood there amid their chaos and relief.

“Who could that be?” Elizabeth asked.

“Oh, dear,” Pippa’s mother said.

Pippa’s heart dropped to her stomach. Now that she had received her mother and father’s approval to marry Charlie, she would have to handle another situation. She would have to face Lord Ganton and tell him that she was going to marry another.

“I will speak with him,” Pippa’s father said.

“No,” Pippa replied. “It should be me.”

Her father looked at her with a question, as if asking her whether it was such a good idea.

“If he believes that I am still being coy, you may explain to him. But, as it is, I ought to be the one to tell him,” Pippa said.

“Very well,” her father replied. “We shall await you in the study. You may speak with him in the parlour.”

Pippa looked at Charlie again and took his hand quickly, giving it a squeeze.

“I shall return to you soon,” she said.

“Good,” he replied. “Because I have a very important question to ask you.”

He grinned at her, and Pippa couldn't help smiling back. She knew what that question would be and could not wait to hear it. But for now, she answered the door and saw Lord Ganton standing before her with a smile of his own.

“Lord Ganton, welcome,” Pippa said.

“Thank you, Lady Pippa. I have not seen you in so long. I was not sure that you would be ready to speak with me,” he said.

“Actually, I should like to tell you in the parlour. I know there is much that needs to be explained,” she said.

Lord Ganton followed Pippa to the parlour, and she gestured for him to be seated.

“I know that you came for dinner, and I beg your pardon, but I am not entirely sure whether dinner is coming soon,” she said, having no idea if the maids had finished preparing anything or if Lord Ganton would even want to stay.

“You mustn’t worry. I am perfectly fine. Is everything well with you? And your family?” he asked, looking confused by this strange meeting with Pippa.

“Indeed, Lord Ganton. However, I ought to tell you that this evening has been rather ... strange, I suppose,” she said.

“Strange how?”

“I am sorry that you have not seen me since the night you proposed. As it happens, I was being honest with you. I care for you, but not in such a way that I wish to marry you. I am sorry that my mother told you otherwise,” Pippa said.

Lord Ganton looked down and nodded.

“I suspected as much. I wanted to believe your mother, but I did not think you would truly put me through that,” he said.

“I certainly would not have done so intentionally,” Pippa replied.

“Then I must ask what you intend to do now. I expect you shall refuse to marry me?” he asked, looking somewhat sad but also expectant.

“I fear that I cannot. I am in love with another,” she confessed.

“Ah,” he said, sighing. Clearly, he was disappointed, but Pippa sensed that he was not so discouraged that he would be angry with her.

“I know I have disappointed you. I feel awful at having put you through this. You deserve a woman who truly does care for you. And, as it happens, I do believe that Lady Anna would be an ideal match for you,” Pippa said.

The brightness in Lord Ganton’s face was undeniable, and Pippa laughed at how obvious it was. He immediately turned red, embarrassed by his eagerness.

“Forgive me, Lady Pippa,” he said, looking down.

“There is nothing to forgive, Lord Ganton. I am glad to know that you are happy about this news. She is a good woman, and I believe she would make you a very happy man,” she said.

“And you are not only saying this to be rid of me, are you? Do you honestly believe she would like me?” he asked.

Pippa grinned and nodded.

“Lord Ganton, Lady Anna and I have always had a slight ... competition between us. She is a better dancer, a better artist, and a more skilled linguist than I. She often has men after her, but, like me, she has chosen to wait for the right gentleman to come along. I would not be surprised in the least if you proved to be that gentleman,” Pippa replied.

Lord Ganton gave Pippa a polite nod and a wide grin.

“Very well, then, Lady Pippa. I shall depart, and I give you my most heartfelt congratulations on the match you have made,” he said.

“And I wish you all the best in your pursuit of Lady Anna,” Pippa replied.

With that, Lord Ganton made to depart, and Pippa rushed towards the study.

Indeed, Charlie had a question to ask her, and Pippa was desperate to answer.

## Chapter 38

When Pippa entered the study, Charlie knew it was time. He looked at her with all the love and hope in his eyes he had carried around since the first night he saw her at her aunt's party.

He could hardly believe that now, nearly a month later, he was going to propose to her.

Charlie took a step forward, aware they would not be given privacy for this moment. He left behind the tense silence that had been in the room just moments before as they waited for Pippa to finish her meeting with Lord Ganton. He left behind the awkwardness and uncertainty regarding Lady Bregman and how she must feel about him even now.

All he focused on was the woman who stood before him now, with her bright eyes and lovely smile. He took her hand in his and released the breath he had been holding in anticipation of her arrival.

"Lady Pippa, I have a very important question for you," he began.

"Yes?" she asked eagerly.

He smiled and cocked his head to the side.

"Are you still engaged to Lord Ganton?"



Pippa laughed at his teasing and shook her head.

“No, I am not. And that is not the sort of question I wish you to ask me,” she said, squeezing his hand playfully and urging him to go on.

“Very well. Then I must ask you another question,” he said.

“I hope this time you ask me the question I have been waiting for,” she said.

“I believe it is,” Charlie replied. “Lady Pippa, will you consent to be my wife? Will you spend your days by my side always and know that my love for you is beyond anything I have ever felt before? Will you accept that I shall give you everything I am able, although it shall never be so grand as the life you have led thus far?”

Tears welled in her eyes, but Charlie knew his own reflected these drops of joy. He knew their happiness had been such a long time coming that there was nothing more they could do but cry of happiness and release the anxiety that had held them captive all this time, slaves to their disappointment and fear.

“Charlie, I will be your wife,” Pippa answered. “I promise to spend all my days by your side, to love you always, to enjoy every moment that we have together. I promise to remember that you are not simply my husband; you are my dearest friend. And if we must continue to fight for the right to spend our lives together, I shall fight. If society does not accept us, I shall be content with that. Because you are the only thing in this world that matters to me now.”

Charlie's heart soared. He could hardly believe that after all this time apart, after all the chaos that had occurred and all the disputing that had kept them apart, he was finally going to marry Pippa.

It was strange, knowing that their love had been a force of healing for her mother and father. In many ways, that marriage had to be made whole before Pippa and Charlie could truly find their own stride. But he didn't mind so much. It was beautiful, he thought, that his father and mother's love story had inspired him to pursue Pippa. And now, her mother and father's story had been the catalyst to allow them to be together at last.

"Well, I do suppose it is time for us to celebrate," Pippa's father announced.

With that, Elizabeth came rushing for Pippa and grasped her hand, pulling her off so they could discuss the plans for the wedding. Meanwhile, Pippa's father came to Charlie.

"I admire your tenacity," he said.

"Your Grace?"

"I know you love my daughter, and I know I can trust you. If you were any less of a man, you would have given up by now. But it is not stubbornness or foolishness that kept you going. It is commitment. I trust you, and I have learnt from you. That is something I never anticipated," Lord Bregman said.

“Th-thank you, Your Grace,” Charlie said.

“Now, if we are to be family, it is very important that you are not so afraid of me,” Lord Bregman said.

Charlie laughed.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but that is going to be very difficult. Not only are you Lady Pippa’s father, but you are a duke. I am not such an important man, and I cannot fathom a world in which you and I should ever be equals,” Charlie said.

“We are equals, young man. Just because we are seen differently by society does not mean that we are not. I know that it may be confusing or frustrating, watching how the world was made for the likes of my wife and me. But look at my daughter. Look at the woman you love. She has the wisdom to see that stations and nobility and all that ... it means nothing. Love means everything,” he said.

And Charlie truly believed him. When he looked at Pippa, he knew that it was true. Love meant everything. Love was the thing that had brought him this far. It was the thing that had opened the door to a whole new life and being with Pippa when nothing else mattered.

Charlie looked at the woman who would be his wife, and he imagined her on their wedding day. He imagined her pregnant with their first child. He imagined her ageing and old, her hand still in his.

He would never let her go.

“Begging your pardon, Lady Andrews, but may I request everyone’s presence in the parlour?” Charlie asked, interrupting Lady Andrews and Pippa in their conversation.

It was a strange request, he knew. After all, he was a guest, but he was asking them all to follow him. Still, they made their way to the parlour, and Charlie made straight for the piano, sitting and loosening his shoulders as he got comfortable.

At last, he began to play a melody. It was a melody that he had been working on for quite some time but had not yet finished. He had been waiting for the ending, never sure if it would be that sad minor chord or dissonance or, unexpectedly, the joyous ring of a bright major.

But now, he knew. He carried the melody through trills and moments of brightness, only to be followed by a sense of doom and pain. Each trial found its way back to the light and, as Charlie brought the song to the final conclusion, he finished it with the excitement of days to come.

This was his song. Of all the ones he had written for Pippa, none had encompassed the joy and pain, the light and dark, the fullness of their story in the way this one did. But now, he had finished it. He had brought it to an end.

And Charlie smiled, knowing that the end of this song was the beginning of forever.

## Epilogue

Pippa looked out from her green eyes, taking in the view of the meadow. She wished the wedding could take place out here, but it would not have been possible, and she simply had to accept that.

“Are you certain the church is nearby?” her mother asked, breathing heavily as they walked.

“Yes, Mother. You mustn’t worry. Charlie assured me that it was just beyond the meadow,” Pippa replied.

Elizabeth sighed, clearly annoyed they still had not arrived, despite all the promises that the church was close.

The morning had got off to a rather simple start. Pippa had made herself ready, putting on her loveliest gown, accepting the bouquet of wildflowers from Elizabeth, having her mother fix up her hair into a neatly plaited twist. She was sure that everything would go smoothly, and she would be standing before Charlie soon enough, saying her vows.

But then, the coachman was late, citing a problem with a wheel on the coach. He claimed that all had been fixed, and Pippa’s mother urged him to hurry up so they would not be late. When he started the journey, her mother shouted again that he must pick up his speed and make haste.

That was when the coach lurched forward, crashing down. Pippa had

screamed, but once she realised they were all fine, she took a deep breath and opened the door of the coach. She climbed out and began to walk.

Her mother and Elizabeth had asked her what on earth she was doing, and she told them she would not wait another moment. She was going to her wedding.

Now, here they were, in the middle of a field. They had never spent time in Wesley-upon-Tyne before. It was, however, Charlie's birthplace and where he had spent many years as a child. His father had been a friend of the vicar here, and he had requested they have the wedding in this small town.

Pippa would have been happy to be married anywhere and readily agreed. Her mother clearly regretted such a fast decision.

"See?" Pippa said, nodding up ahead.

Just over a small hill, they saw the church nestled into the meadow. It was a strikingly beautiful sight to behold, and Pippa found it deeply romantic to be getting married out in the country like this. She wished she'd had the chance to spend more time in this place, but with Charlie's work in the city, she knew that it would not always be easy for them to stay here.

After another ten minutes of walking, they reached the church and saw Joseph standing outside looking frightfully anxious.

"You have arrived! Good heavens, what happened? We expected you

an hour ago,” he said.

“It is a very long story, but the coach broke down,” Pippa told him.

“Charlie was beginning to worry. He said he knew you would not have second thoughts, but he feared you had been injured. I shall go in and tell him you have arrived, and then you will hear the music begin,” Joseph said.

“Thank you, Joseph,” Pippa said.

“You are more than welcome,” he replied, flashing her a smile before he disappeared into the church.

As promised, the music soon began, and Pippa entered the church and looked down the aisle to the man she loved, standing with a wide grin on his face. She walked towards him slowly and with the music Joseph, Nathan, and Simon were playing as she drew near to Charlie, hardly believing that she was finally marrying this man she loved so desperately.

“Pippa,” he said as she reached him. He took her hands in his own, and they glanced at the vicar as he began.

“Dearly beloved, we welcome you here today as we join in matrimony Charles William Thomas and Pippa Jane Andrews. With this covenant and commitment, we celebrate the unity that these two shall share henceforth as they declare their love for one another,” the vicar said.

He spoke about the importance of love and respect before moving on to the vows and turning first to Charlie.

“Do you, Charlie Thomas, vow to wed Pippa Andrews? Do you promise to be there for her in want or in plenty, in sickness and health, through joy and through pain, until death has parted you?”

“I do,” Charlie said, sighing in relief at those words.

He then turned to Pippa and asked her the same questions. She knew exactly what her answer was, but she had known that for quite some time. Since she first knew who Charlie was, she had known that she was willing to go through trials to be with him. Now, at last, she could make the vow that she would continue to do so for the rest of her life.

“I do,” she replied.

“Very well. Then I have the pleasure of announcing that, by the power invested in me by God and the Church of England, you are now husband and wife,” the vicar declared.

Charlie pulled Pippa closer to him, and they tried with all their might to show restraint before their friends and family. Pippa could hardly believe that Charlie was her husband now, and she was terribly eager to be in his arms but did her best to remain proper.

She looked out at the people who had attended. It was a strange group, to be sure. There were a great many musicians, some of them from countries far away from England. There were also a few



members of noble society, such as Elizabeth and her husband and Lord Ganton and Anna, his new wife.

It was remarkable to think that these people were often not allowed to be together, but Pippa was delighted that, at her wedding, they should all be considered equals.

“Come,” Charlie said, leading Pippa out of the church.

She could hardly wait to enjoy the reception and then leave to be alone with her husband and talk to him freely. They walked out of the sanctuary and to the hall behind the church where there was already food ready for the reception, as well as more musicians ready to play for the celebration.

“Mrs Pippa Thomas,” Pippa said. “At last, I may go by that name. I am so honoured to have it.”

“Are you? You would not rather be a duchess?” Charlie asked.

She laughed and shook her head.

“Who would want to be a duchess when they may be Mrs Thomas? I have a husband who writes music for me, a husband who gives me whatever I wish in life. Just because what I wish is not wealth and prestige does not mean that it has no value,” she said.

“And what have I given you besides music?” Charlie asked.

Pippa glanced at the door of the hall as their guests entered. She knew that she and Charlie had only a moment longer together before they would be swept away by the others.

“You have given me peace,” she said. “You have given me trust in a society that is greater than simply nobility and commoner. You have proven to me that love is abounding, and you have even shown me that my own mother and father might be able to find something akin to love.”

“Indeed, they have seemed different,” Charlie said.

“Not merely different. They are completely new, Charlie. I have never seen them like this before, and I am delighted by it. I see how my father cares for my mother. It may not be love, but it is affection, nevertheless. I am overjoyed when I see how he speaks to her so gently,” Pippa said.

“And your mother? She treats your father with true respect,” Charlie said.

“That is something I never imagined I would see. She is kind to him at times. And when she has spoken improperly towards him, she always apologises. I never imagined I would see her truly sorry, but there she is. It is a marvellous wonder,” Pippa said.

“I am glad that we might have been some sort of an inspiration for them,” Charlie said.

“As am I. Now, I expect we are soon to be swept off by others, but before we are, know that I have never been so happy as I am now, Charlie. Thank you for making me your wife,” Pippa said.

“And thank you for making me your husband,” Charlie replied.

They were each swept away, as expected. Pippa was ushered by some of the ladies, and they spoke of the excitement of marriage and how soon it was wise to have children. The unmarried women shared how much they longed for husbands who would play music for them and how tremendous it would be if Pippa and Charlie got to travel as they hoped.

“Indeed, we do hope for such an opportunity. I expect that we shall go somewhere close to begin with as that will be all we can afford, but I am very eager to see something outside of England,” Pippa said.

“And where will you go?” Anna pushed.

“Perhaps Italy? I am not quite sure as of yet, but that is my hope. I expect that you shall do much more travelling than I, but you must always return and tell me about your adventures so that I may plan for ours,” Pippa said.

“I would be more than happy to aid you,” Anna said with a smile.

After dancing, food, and cake, it was finally time for the reception to come to an end. Pippa drew near to Charlie, and they said their last

goodbyes to the guests who had come out to the country to celebrate with them.

“Shall we?” Charlie asked.

“Please,” Pippa replied.

They left the hall and found a coach waiting for them. Charlie helped Pippa climb in, and they made their way through the small town to a cottage on a small plot of land. As Charlie helped Pippa back out of the coach, she took in the sight of it and smiled once more.

“This is it?” she asked happily.

“This is it,” he confirmed. “My father grew up in this house. He met my mother when he was performing in the city, and after they married, they came here to live for a time. I was born here and spent my early years in this house. It may not be so grand as you have known, but I do hope it is sufficient for our week staying here.”

“I am thrilled to be here,” Pippa replied. “It is wonderful to see this place which is yours.”

Charlie laughed.

“Sadly, it is not mine. It may have been, once upon a time, but now, I am simply lucky that we could afford to rent it for this week. The man who owns it purchased it directly from my father, and he is very

wealthy and stays here only when he wants out of the city. He was a good friend to my father, so that is why he was generous enough to let us rent it,” Charlie explained.

“Well, no matter who owns it, I still see it as yours,” she said.

They went inside, and Charlie showed Pippa around the house, sharing a few memories he had from his childhood. Pippa was amazed to hear how Charlie had lived and grown. She loved to hear the stories about his mother and father, about how they lived before his mother died and then his father.

“But, of course, we were already living in London by then,” he said, finishing the story.

“Well, I am sorry that you were unable to remain here any longer, but I am delighted that we are here now,” Pippa said.

“As am I. Now, may I play you one more song?” he asked, grinning and pulling Pippa close.

She looked up into his eyes and smiled dreamily. It was still such a shock to be there with him, to know that he would forever be hers and she would be his.

“You may play me music for the rest of our days,” Pippa replied.

Charlie started to pull away but seemed to think better of it. Instead,

he drew Pippa even closer and pressed his forehead to hers.

“Forgive me, but before I play you a song, there is just one other thing that I have wanted to do all day,” he said softly.

“And what is that?” she asked, still feeling utterly overcome by her joy.

Charlie answered her by gently pressing his lips to hers in their first kiss as husband and wife. At that moment, Pippa knew that no matter how talented and creative her husband might be, there was no music so beautiful as this.

## ***THE END***

*Can't get enough of Pippa and Charlie? Then make sure to check out the  
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

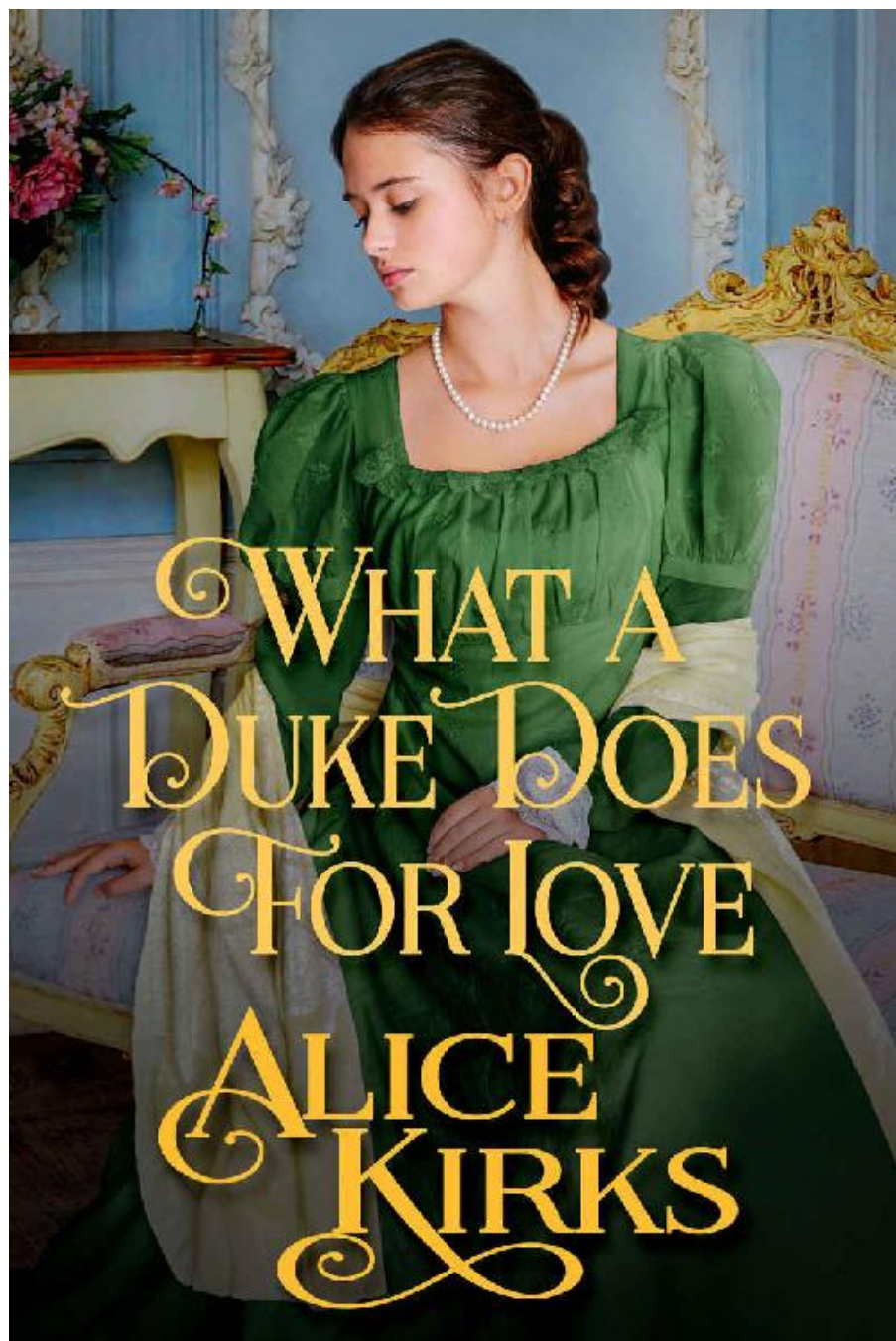
*Will Pippa and Charlie succeed in society despite their difference in class?  
Is there a way that Lord and Lady Bregman will ever find happiness and  
contentment in their marriage?*

*What does the future hold for the quartet? How will the marriage affect the  
reputations of them all?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://alicekirks.com/pippa>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**What a Duke Does for Love**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*





## What a Duke Does for Love

## Introduction

Following the death of her beloved brother, Lady Marlana Ashover finds herself in unbearable grief and suspicious of what truly happened to her brother. Even though she convinces her family to travel to London with the excuse of the Season, Marlana vows to secretly investigate her brother's loss and find its true cause. When she meets a young Duke who wants to help her in her quest, Marlana finds not only a loyal friend in him, but also the greatest love of her life...

Will Marlana solve the mystery of her brother's demise despite the lurking dangers? Could the kind hearted Duke be the person who will bring light into her gloomy life?

Ryan Wellston, the Duke of Claypool, has never had genuine feelings for other women except for Marlana. However, no matter how much he wants to help and make her happy, tremendous challenges are threatening his hopes and dreams... Nevertheless, Ryan is determined to do everything in his power to find the answers to the burning questions of who killed James and why. Will the charismatic Duke manage to bring the truth to the surface? Will he eventually shine a smile upon his dear Marlana's face?

If only things were always as they seemed...

While Ryan and Marlena are unable to deny their blooming feelings, they first have to deal with the chaos that dominates their lives. Especially since someone is determined to separate them and steal their every chance at happiness forever. Will the two soulmates shed light on an unforgivable truth and heal their past wounds together? Or will the current threats and emotional storm irreversibly overshadow their growing love?

## Prologue

Marlena sat in the drawing-room and looked down at her hands where they rested on the black taffeta of her gown, the white skin contrasting with the dark fabric. She focused on them, willing herself to feel something.

She wished she could feel some emotion that would connect her to herself. Right now, she felt like those were someone else's hands and not hers, as if she was somewhere else, floating above the black-clad young woman with the pale brown hair pulled back in a severe style.

"Can I fetch you something, Marlena?" her mother asked. She was standing across from her, black-dressed, her own dark hair pulled back from her face. She had a teapot in her hand, from which she poured cups of tea for the guests.

"No, thank you," Marlena said.

She didn't want to eat or drink anything. She didn't want to be here. If she had the choice, she would be out riding in the fields, her hair loose, soaked with the rain as she screamed her pain and sorrow to the empty skies. She would not be here in this cold, emotionless drawing-room with cold, silent people pretending they felt nothing.

If she could, she would scream James' name so loud the windows would shatter.

He was her brother, and he was dead, and it was wrong.

Why could she not cry?

“Would you care to go outdoors?”

Marlena nodded. Charles, her elder brother, was here, newly returned from the army. She was so grateful that he had managed to attend and cared for her as always. He sat across from her on the chaise-longue beside their father, and his blue eyes were gentle as they regarded her. Marlena felt like he understood her. He was, in many ways, like her. He would rather be elsewhere, she thought.

“Thank you,” she said. “I would.”

She knew that if there were any difficulty in leaving, he would attend to it. He had a strong character like hers, not like James, who lay in the churchyard. James was so gentle, so tender. He was the younger of her two brothers, and he had never hurt anyone, never so much as said a cross word.

He nodded to her and stood, stretching his back as he did so. “Mother, Father ... we are going to take the air outside a moment. Excuse us.”

“Charles, that isn’t proper ...” his mother began.

He smiled at her gently. “Mother, it’s quite acceptable. Nobody will mind if we take five minutes to walk and stretch our legs. We shall be

back in plenty of time.”

Marlena looked gratefully at Charles. He had always had a good way about him – able to stand firm but without needing to resort to anger to do so. He would make a fine viscount, she was sure.

She glanced at their father on the way to the door. He nodded to her from where he sat on the chaise-longue, blue eyes troubled. He looked drawn and pale, and she felt her heart thump, filled with worry for him. She squeezed her own blue eyes shut for a moment as she walked along with Charles. Her father had been so ill, and she feared the shock of James passing would challenge his already-weakened health.

“Thank you,” she said again when they were out of earshot.

Charles smiled at her. His blue eyes were sad, but he still managed to find the strength somewhere to grin at her. “I thought we could both use some fresh air.”

“Yes,” Marlena murmured. It was stifling in the drawing-room – stiflingly silent. She couldn’t bear it. She looked up at Charles. “I can’t make sense of it,” she said.

Charles inclined his head, agreeing distantly. “I know,” he said. He looked out over the lawns, his own face still. “I think it makes no sense. Someone so young, to be gone so quickly.” Charles was older than Marlena by eight years and older than James by five.

“I don’t mean that,” Marlena said softly. “I mean, it makes no sense that our brother passed in a riding accident. You knew how good he

was.” She walked across the grass beside him, feeling the need to move.

Charles looked into her eyes, stopping beside her. “Marlena, it doesn’t always matter. Some accidents have very little to do with skill. Anyone can have an accident.”

Marlena shut her eyes a moment, feeling distressed. This was her brother, the one person who she could talk to besides her maidservant Henriette. Why could he not understand what she meant?

She felt as though there was something behind James’ death, something more. That it hadn’t been as told in the story they had received. She knew James, and what she might not have known about him in person, she knew about his skill as a horseman.

She had raced him so often! She knew his strengths and knew without question how good he was – she reckoned him to be among the best riders in the ton. He would not have come off his horse as they had been told he had.

“I just can’t help how I feel about it,” she said. She didn’t know what to say to him to make him hear her.

Charles took her hand. “Grief is a strange thing, my sister. It can take years before one comes to terms with something. I feel we would do better not to try to make sense of it now ... maybe in a year, we will be able to see it with a clearer perspective. For now, we should just weep and scream if we have to, and let ourselves slowly heal.”

Marlena felt tears down her cheeks. She looked up at her brother and rested a hand on his shoulder. She knew he was being kind, and his words had touched her heart. She knew, too, that in many ways, he was right. Her heart would slowly heal over the years, and she would slowly come to an understanding of what happened. But there were things that didn't fit.

"Thank you, Charles," she said. She knew she would not make him understand.

He rested a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. "You are my dearest sister," he said gently. "You're so strong; your spirit inspires my own."

"Thank you, Charles," she repeated. She felt his kindness melted her heart, and, suddenly she found herself clinging to him, tears pouring down her cheeks as she held him, like when she was a toddler, and she had come to Charles, her safe place in a cold and confusing world. He wrapped his arms around her, like he had when she was just a baby, and held her and let her weep. It was the first time she had cried, and she knew that it would be months – maybe years – before she could cry for James properly. Now, she cried mainly for herself.

Charles held her for a long moment. After she sniffed slowly, her tears running down her face, he stood back. "All right?"

She nodded, reaching into the little drawstring bag she had around her wrist, where she kept a handkerchief. She blew her nose, sniffing noisily. "Yes," she said.

He smiled. "My wild sister. Look at you ... all windswept."



She lifted a hand to her head where some of her honey-blonde hair had escaped. She shook her head, flushing.

“It just does that.”

He smiled softly, took her hand, and led her back to the house.

She held his hand and felt better, but she could not shake the feeling that the story they had heard of James’ death was not quite right. She could not accept that he had simply been thrown from his horse.

And she was going to London to find the truth, whatever anyone said to her.

# Chapter 1

## *A ball in the evening*

Ryan looked around the hall at Almack's, feeling weary. He had attended the event mainly because he had to, not necessarily because he wished to. He didn't care for crowds of people or for socializing in general, especially not in London.

He glanced across at a young lady – Lady Camelia – who had been introduced to him by her father. She was pretty – brown-haired, round-cheeked, and with big brown eyes. He reckoned he might as well dance with her.

He was not particularly keen on balls, dances, or socializing in general. He tried his best not to form connections with anyone if he could avoid it. Being raised in almost isolation at his manor – with just tutors – following his father's death, had ensured that he had no preparation for society at all. It was easier he had found over the years, to adopt an indifferent air than to let people close.

"My Lady?" he said, approaching the young woman. "Would you like to dance?"

"Your Grace! I would be honoured." She curtsied, and he could see how flustered she seemed, her eyes downcast, breath quickening.

"Well, then. I think there's a Polonaise next. Shall we?"

“Yes, Your Grace! Why, what an honour. I’m quite dizzied.”

Ryan felt his own eyes squeeze shut a moment. He felt so awkward! What was he supposed to do or say? He stood silently beside her, waiting for the musicians to provide the opening melody.

He let his dark eyes wander across the dance floor, to where he could just spot the dark hair of his friend, Jasper, standing out against the white wall behind. He was leaning on the wall, drinking, and Ryan was sure it wasn’t cordial in that glass he held. He felt a little disgruntled: he could have done with Jasper’s assistance just then, he thought.

The music was starting, lively and melodic, and he took her hand and led her through the paces, feeling like he was a wooden marionette. He had to admit that Lady Camelia was a good dancer – elegant and gracious – but he couldn’t match her. He was tolerable as a dancer, he knew – his tutors had told him so, and at Cambridge, nobody had noticed anything else – but he didn’t feel right when he danced in London.

He didn’t feel right in London at all.

The music was moving to a new key, and he reckoned they were getting close to halfway. He counted his steps and focused firmly on the bright hall and the people, doing his best to ignore everyone and everything around him. He could feel her ladyship’s hand in his own, and he wished he could think to make conversation, but he’d never been much good at it. He felt relieved when the music changed again, indicating they were nearing the end.

“Thank you,” he said as he bowed to Lady Camelia.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said. She looked at him as if she expected him to say something. Ryan took a deep breath.

“I will go and take refreshments,” he said. He turned around before she could ask him to fetch something and walked briskly to the table.

When he got there, Jasper walked over.

“I saw you, Ryan,” he said. His voice sounded pointed.

“What, old boy?” he asked mildly. He felt uncomfortable – like Jasper had something to pick him out about.

“I saw you run away from one of the prettier girls in the room without saying anything to her.” His expression showed hurt.

“I didn’t run away!” Ryan hissed, feeling annoyed. “I simply politely distanced myself.”

Jasper raised a brow. “Like always?”

Ryan drew a breath. He didn’t need Jasper to act as though he was the voice of rationality. He had his own system when it came to London

and the *ton*. He didn't need his friend to be so difficult. The most annoying thing about it was that he knew his friend was right. He was rude and what he did was unkind.

"Yes, all right. I don't tend to make friendships easily. I am rude quite a lot of the time because I barely talk. But I don't need my best friend – my *only* friend – to be so critical."

He felt overly warm, his black velvet jacket seeming suddenly too hot. He wished he could take it off, but nobody would attend Almack's in just shirtsleeves. He looked up at Jasper, who smiled fondly.

"I am aware you don't," he said. "But I will be critical, anyway – I offer it as a service, absolutely without asking any money for it."

They looked at each other. Ryan grinned. He could never resist his friend's jokes; not for long, anyhow.

"Very well, Jasper. You are right. I am rude. And quite probably worse, too. But you know what it's like – I'm too old to learn new ways."

Jasper looked at him, and Ryan could see fondness in his brown eyes.

He was about to say something when Jasper's wife came across to join them. A pretty woman – plump, with reddish hair and the palest, softest skin Ryan had ever seen – she looked up at Jasper. Ryan saw his friend's expression soften. He looked down at his wife, Adeline, with such tenderness that Ryan felt his breath almost stop.

“Dearest,” Adeline said with a teasing look in her green-flecked eyes, “won’t you come here a moment? I’m arguing with Lord Rockley, and we need you to settle the conversation.”

Ryan looked at Jasper, who smiled lovingly at Adeline. He glanced at Ryan apologetically, but Ryan could see he didn’t regret for a moment going with Adeline.

“Excuse me, old chap,” he said.

Ryan inclined his head. “Of course, Jasper.” He gestured at the refreshments table. “I’ll just stay here, I reckon.”

Jasper smiled. “You could go and dance again, you know.”

Ryan shot him a look that was slightly exaggerated – he wasn’t really annoyed – and they both laughed. Lady Adeline smiled and curtsied to Ryan. “Good evening, Your Grace,” she said.

Ryan bowed, greeted her politely, and turned to the refreshments table. He felt strangely awkward and a little confused, too.

He had never seen anyone look at someone the way Jasper looked at Adeline. She looked just the same at him, too. He wondered at it. How might it feel to love someone the way the two of them loved one another? He couldn’t imagine.

“Why are you thinking about that?” he asked himself, annoyed.

He was the sort of fellow who liked his own company. He had told himself that repeatedly at Cambridge, and he told himself now that nothing had changed. The further you kept from people, the happier you would be – that was his phrase. He would believe that, too, except for how blissfully Jasper and his wife smiled at each other.

“Damn it, you’re moody today,” he told himself. He went to the table – where a small crowd had developed – and tried to reach a glass of something. There were two footmen in livery pouring drinks, and he nodded to one, receiving a glass of sparkling wine.

“Ah! Your grace! What an honour to see you here. It’s been years since I last called at Claypool.”

Ryan raised a brow. He recalled the fellow vaguely – Viscount Alsworth. He had been a captain in the army and was distantly related to the family. Ryan wasn’t in the mood for conversation right now, and he hastily looked about for an escape.

“Good to see you, Lord Alsworth. It’s so hot in here, isn’t it?” Ryan said, making a step towards the exit. There were two doors leading onto the balcony, and he went quickly in that direction. Lord Alsworth followed him a few paces.

“A fine evening. Yes, very warm! It’s all the bodies, you know.” He gestured at the room. “So many people, and you get a fine heat.”

Ryan nodded. He enjoyed Lord Alsworth's company sometimes – he was at least unconventional in the extreme, saying whatever happened to pop into his head – but right now, he wasn't equipped with enough energy. He walked to the doors, managed to slip in front of a few people, and hurried to the exit. There were some people by the door, but he managed to step outside.

He stood there on the balcony, taking gasps of air. He felt as if he'd been stifled underground in there, surrounded by so many people. Gradually becoming calmer, after a moment or two out there, he looked over the city. He could see lights here and there in windows, but it was mostly dark, the rooftops black against the midnight-dark sky. Stars twinkled overhead, silver and remote. He looked up, feeling oddly empty inside.

He was used to his own company, so it was strange to him that he should feel alone. But standing there under cold stars, he realised he had been alone most of his life. His parents had both died when he was a child – Mama when he was just two and Papa when he was eight. Tutors had raised him in Claypool, the family manor, which was held in trust for him by his tutor Marlford until he was sixteen.

He was a duke, but he had nobody besides Jasper he felt close to.

"Damn it, you're being silly," he told himself harshly. He was twenty-four, a duke, and he liked his own company! He was not – absolutely not – feeling lonely.

He sniffed and walked towards the door leading into the hall. It was still crowded and overheated. He could see a dance beginning, people waltzing on the dance floor to the delicate strains of melody. The hall was a mass of black velvet suits, pale dresses, and bright candlelight, the smells of perfume and wine and beeswax subtle in the air.



Ryan stood by the door and tried to find a sense of peace and calm, though he was feeling shaken again. After that moment outside, realising his own aloneness, the ballroom seemed desperately foreign, as if he had wandered into another world whose rules made no sense to him.

“Excuse me.”

He stepped sideways, avoiding a group who had moved to stand nearer the entrance, and walked into the curtain hanging by the door. It unfurled to reveal a young girl, who looked at him with startled eyes.

“My Lady!” he gasped.

He found himself looking into the loveliest eyes. They were pale blue. He thought of skies and water, of bluebells and summer flowers and rivulets. He was so stunned by her wide gaze that it took him a second to step back, studying her – she had pale brown hair that was straight, drawn back from her face in a bun.

She was wearing a plain silk gown with a low-cut neck, simpler than the dresses of other ladies. Her face was heart-shaped and her eyes wide, framed with brown lashes and brows. She was beautiful in a strong, compelling way.

She looked up at him, and he thought shock was what he could read most strongly on her face – shock and insult.

“My Lord,” she said. She curtsied, and he could tell she was trying to rein in her feelings. She wasn’t able to keep the affronted tone from her voice, and he understood it. He bowed.

“I apologise, My Lady, for having walked into you. But you were hiding behind the curtain.” He couldn’t help a lift of his lips.

“I was simply trying to avoid unwanted company.”

He smiled broadly. “I don’t blame you, My Lady,” he said. “I found myself in the same spot. I went out to take the air. If you like, I could escort you there?” He looked at her hopefully. She was the first person he’d met that drew his heart like this. He felt the urge to speak to her and get to know her better, to understand what had driven her to hide there, and whether she was as much like him as he thought.

“No, thank you, My Lord,” she said. She sounded firm. “I would prefer to remain indoors.”

“Of course,” he said. Perhaps she was offended by the idea of being alone with an unknown gentleman. He glanced about, but if she was accompanied by a maidservant, he could see no sign of her. He turned back to her, bowing again. “I did not intend anything unseemly, My Lady.”

“Well, for that, I commend you, My Lord.” She was teasing him. He grinned, glad she was no longer angry with him.

“My Lady, might I fetch you some refreshment?” he asked. She had

moved towards the room, and he followed her, entranced. She walked with easy grace, and he kept up, wanting to be with her. He had never felt like this, so instantly captivated. He was eager to know more about her.

“No, thank you,” she said. She walked towards a group standing at the side of the room, waiting for the sarabande to end. Perhaps she wanted to dance with him. He felt his heart thump. He never enjoyed dancing, but now he was looking forward to it.

“You like to waltz?” he asked her, thinking there might be a waltz next.

She shrugged. “I am not really in the mood for dancing.”

He raised a brow. She was intriguing. So confident – he was not. He pretended to be, but his own attempts were cold and wooden. She was poised and filled with cool assurance.

“I see,” he said. He was about to ask what would entice her onto the floor when she stepped neatly around two people and went across the room.

Ryan stared. She was talking to a group of people – a tall blond man and two or three other men, some accompanied by ladies. He was about to go and ask to be introduced when a man came up to him.

“Your Grace!” he said, bowing low. “I am delighted to see you here. We met at the park if you recall? I am Lord Abermale. You have not yet been introduced to my daughter?”

Ryan took a deep breath. He looked around, wanting to give the unknown woman an earful. She had led him here with intent! She knew he would be lost in a sea of lords and ladies wanting their daughters to meet him. He was known to be young and wealthy, and that was enough to draw them close. He wanted to rebuke her.

He grinned inwardly. She had served him right. He had been rude all evening, and this was exactly the sort of treatment he merited.

He wished that he could have asked her name – he would love to talk to her again sometime.

## Chapter 2

### *A morning and a walk*

It was cool in the room, and Marlena sat up, blinking and still sleepy. She slipped out of bed, seeing that her maid Henriette had left one window ajar. She was grateful for the cool breeze, and she went to it, looking through the curtain at the scene below.

Her mind drifted back to the ball as she rubbed her eyes wearily. She had returned home after midnight, tired and half-asleep. She had surprised herself by enjoying the ball, and her mind drifted to thoughts of a particular gentleman she'd met.

"Stop being silly," she told herself firmly. He was a foppish Londoner with a rude manner, and she was not going to think of him. She stared down at the street, watching the traffic.

Marlena had never been overly fond of London, but it was oddly diverting after spending a year in the countryside. She watched people walking and coaches trying to get around a cart that had tried to turn in the road. She grinned to herself as a constable came over to observe. He wasn't winning favours from the carter or the gentlefolk, she thought with amusement. She could almost hear them shouting at him.

She went to the pitcher of water on the nightstand and rinsed her face, smiling to herself. She recalled that same reined-in fury from the previous evening.

That gentleman she'd met at Almack's yesterday night – he'd been as angry when she'd lost him in the crowd! She laughed.

"It served him right," she said to herself.

He struck her as arrogant, and she reckoned he'd needed the punishment that being hounded all evening would be. At the same time, though, she had seen something in those dark eyes she'd liked. For a moment, she'd seen genuine eagerness and a keen mind. He had been able to joke and to bear her prank admirably, and she had to appreciate this.

She went to the wall to the bell to summon Henriette, feeling chilly and needing to get dressed and take a meal. She had gone to bed so late last night, and she felt weary still – some tea and toast would certainly be welcomed.

"Morning, My Lady," Henriette greeted her, wearing in a dark dress, her dark hair neatly drawn back from her lively, pretty face.

"Morning, Henriette," Marlena replied. "I'd like to dress for breakfast. Something simple, I think. I don't think Charles plans for us to see anyone or go out this morning." She glanced at the window again, tiredly. A nice day at home would be just what she needed.

"Very good. The green?"

"The one with the little patterns? Yes. I think that will do well."

Marlena liked plainer dresses and wasn't usually fussy about what she wore, but in its own way, it was a pleasure to be able to wear white and other colours than black, grey, and navy blue.

It had been a year since James' passing, and she felt good to be wearing ordinary clothes. Her mind had barely begun to comprehend it. She still could barely think of James – it was too painful. But she had finally convinced Papa to let her and the family return to London.

She had to do everything she could to discover what had happened.

“Will you go to the park, do you think?” Henriette asked. She was busy taking shoes and other things out of the wardrobe.

Marlena tilted her head. “I'm not sure,” she said. “We might do. Charles likes being outside.”

“I'm sure.” Henriette nodded. She hated the city, missing her green leafy Kentish countryside. Marlena knew that. Henriette had been raised in a village that was far even from her own manor home, Halford Park. She missed the countryside, so she imagined Henriette would miss it even more sorely.

“Well, if we go to the park, I shall need you to come along,” she said, thinking of Henriette and how tedious it must be for her to be stuck in the house almost the whole day. “Charles is grand company, but he always ends up in a crowd of military types, and then I need someone else to accompany me anywhere.”

She grinned to herself. She would have been talking to Charles yesterday night, except that he ended up talking to his friends from the army, and she'd wondered off. She frowned to herself. She would never have met the annoying but handsome man had she stayed talking to her brother.

It surprised her that she thought of him as handsome. She blushed but was interrupted from her reverie by Henriette, who was clearly pleased by the prospect of going to the park.

“My Lady! It'd be grand to go to the park. I can't wait.”

Marlena smiled. “Well, then, we shall certainly go, whether Charles wishes to attend or not.”

Henriette grinned. She was a firm friend – she had worked for the family since Marlena was sixteen, just over three years. Marlena was very fond of her and, even if Henriette had a rather quieter nature than her own, she also had uncompromising strength. She always supported Marlena, whether her behaviour was unconventional or not, and she encouraged Marlena in her desire to find out the truth about her brother's passing.

“I think I'd like my hair arranged simply today if you please,” she said to Henriette. She was sitting before the looking glass, and Henriette brushed Marlena's long brown hair, rolling it into a neat bun and tucking some pins into it to hold it in place. Marlena surveyed her appearance. She couldn't help thinking about the man from Almack's ballroom.

He had looked at her with such admiration as if she were beautiful.



She blushed. Strangely, that was a new experience for her. She'd had her debut two years ago when she was seventeen but had never really noticed if the men at Almack's looked at her admiringly or not. She had been too busy taking note of their characters – whether or not she could converse with them, whether or not they struck her as nice people. She didn't dance much, and she had privately concluded she must be plain-looking.

Until yesterday, when that man looked at her like that.

She blushed pink. She shouldn't be thinking like this about him! He was a stranger, and she didn't even know his name. Why was it that he kept on returning to her head?

"That looks nice, thank you," she said to Henriette, glancing at her hairstyle. It was a plain bun; her brown hair pulled back from her face. She had never noticed that she had a nice forehead before or that her eyes were wide and striking blue.

She blushed again, thinking that she really must stop thinking about this man and that it shouldn't make her feel so much prettier just because someone else paid her interest. He had stared at her, and she couldn't help admitting she'd liked it.

Henriette shrugged. "Well, then. I reckon you're ready to go down to breakfast."

"Thank you," Marlena said. She looked down at herself, her body clad in the white gown decorated with green sprigs. She could feel the cool

muslin against her legs, and she thought the dress suited her – the green colour brought out the blue of her eyes.

She waved to Henriette and went swiftly down the hallway to the breakfast room.

Her feet, quiet on the wooden floors, she glanced at the white walls, lit with lamps, though the day was not particularly dark. She went down towards where she could smell the scent of tea and kedgerree, thinking that she had already become accustomed to the house though they had been in London only three days.

“Morning, Charles,” she greeted her brother, sitting at the breakfast table, the *Gazette* propped up on his knee. He looked over, smilingly.

“Good morning, sister,” he said. His handsome face was calm, gaze level. He seemed as though he’d slept soundly eight hours. “I trust you enjoyed last night.”

Marlena grinned. She nodded. “It was not bad,” she said.

“Not too bad?” Her brother chuckled. “My dear Marlena! You sound as though you have been stuck in coach traffic and enjoyed it more.”

Marlena made a face. “The analogy isn’t far wrong, brother. But yes, it was truly not bad ... the music was good; there were friendly people to talk with, and I got away with not having to dance more than twice. I think it was a successful ball.”

Charles laughed. “Marlena, dear ... I do wish you would enjoy balls more.”

Marlena looked at her breakfast. She had been helping herself to a slice of toast with marmalade. She focused on that rather than on what Charles said. She knew he wished for her to enjoy balls so that she would meet people her own age – particularly young lords and gentlemen who might seek permission for courting her.

Charles was a good self-appointed guardian.

“I wish I could enjoy balls, too,” she commented. Her former cheerful humour returned, and she felt one eyebrow rise. “It would make it a lot easier to attend as many of the things as I must.”

Charles chuckled. “Sister, you are right. I apologise. Maybe a salon will be more tolerable for you. I believe we are attending tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes. I almost forgot,” Marlena agreed. “At three of the clock, is that correct?”

“Absolutely.” Charles nodded. “I’m sorry I will be out most of the day, but I’ll be back in plenty of time to escort you. Should you wish to go elsewhere, you’ll need Henriette as your chaperone.”

“Yes, brother,” Marlena agreed.

They sat quietly, and Marlana bit into her toast, thick with marmalade. She tasted the rich, sweet flavour and thought about her plans for the day. She would certainly be going to the park. She found her thoughts wandering to the gentleman she'd met the previous evening and felt a smile lift the corner of her mouth. She hastily schooled her face to neutral, in case Charles should notice.

She had a sense that he would not approve of the young fellow.

She had to admit, as far as character went, she wasn't certain of her opinion, either. She didn't like his arrogance – she wasn't even sure what it was he did that made her think he was arrogant. It was just something about his attitude that had struck her as the kind of brittle coldness that hid insecurities.

“Marlena, sister?” Charles asked, making her jump. “Sorry. I just wanted to ask if you will be going out today? I have a busy afternoon planned. Mr Marwell is going to be here to discuss the accounts. I know, I hate it, too ... but I need to be there. Papa asked if I would sit with him today. It's easier for him – and for me – if I take over the accounts.”

“I understand,” Marlana agreed. She didn't want to think about her papa and his health – he had a bad incident with his health a few years ago, and the recent shock had affected him. She knew Charles was here in London mainly because their parents needed him.

“So, will you stay here today?” he asked. “I'm sure there are plenty of diversions in London that even you might like to attend instead.”

She chuckled. “I'm not that fussy, am I?” she asked. “Well, mayhap.

And yes, I had thought perhaps Henriette might accompany me to Hyde Park. We would both benefit from taking the air.”

“Of course, my dear sister,” Charles said. He leaned back in his chair, smiling fondly. “And should you need anything, I’ll be up in the drawing room. It’s going to be a tedious morning.”

She smiled. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “I can only imagine how tedious it must be.”

He chuckled. “Trust me ... it’s not too bad. I just sit back and imagine the sea. It’s ever so restful.”

Marlena was still laughing about that when the butler arrived to summon Charles downstairs to meet Mr Marwell. She leaned back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling, feeling strangely excited about the trip outdoors.

She went upstairs to change and to fetch Henriette – they might as well go out now since Charles would clearly be busy all morning, and she might have a chance of seeing him when he came out of the meeting.

“Henriette?” she called at the door. She thought she might be in there cleaning.

“My Lady?”

“I wanted to get dressed to go out,” Marlena explained to her maid, who was tidying her dressing table. “The accountant is keeping Charles busy all morning, so we could go to the park now if we so chose.”

“Hurrah!” Henriette sounded excited. “Will we be out long, My Lady?”

Marlena shrugged. “It depends on if we meet anyone in the park,” she said. “But I am sure we will return here for luncheon.”

“Grand, My Lady,” Henriette said. “Then let me help you dress. Will you be changing your outfit this morning?”

“Mayhap,” Marlena allowed, going to check her reflection. She thought the dress was suitable for a walk outdoors – a sensible day dress, one that was pretty and fashionable. She just couldn’t decide if it looked good on her.

She blushed, thinking about meeting the young man from last night. She felt her cheeks go red as she realised what a strong impression he must have made upon her.

“No, thank you, Henriette,” she said after a long moment. “I will wear this dress. If you could fetch my white bonnet? And I think my cloak is downstairs. We will need those, I reckon – it seems to be a bit of an unusually cold wind outdoors.”

“Yes, My Lady. I’ll fetch it directly. And my cloak from upstairs ... I’ll be needing it.”

“Very sensible,” Marlena agreed.

Henriette went out with a grin in the direction of the stairs, and Marlena stood in her chamber, thinking about the day. She felt surprised by the fact that she hoped to meet the man from the previous night. She had come here with no thoughts like that – her only purpose in London was to find out more about James and his last week here. But now, when she thought of that man, her mood lifted, and she wanted to smile.

“That’s foolish,” she told herself, but she was still grinning as she heard Henriette’s feet come down the hallway towards the bedroom.

Whoever he was – she had no idea who he was right now – he had certainly given her much to consider, but she still didn’t really understand what he made her heart feel.

## Chapter 3

### *A morning and a new acquaintance*

It felt bright in the street, though it wasn't particularly less cloudy than usual. Ryan walked alongside Jasper, feeling surprisingly frustrated with his friend and even more so with himself.

"Jasper ... you must have." Ryan felt annoyed. He had been asking Jasper all morning, with tedious regularity, whether he knew anything about the girl he'd met yesterday. Apparently, he hadn't seen Ryan with her all evening.

"Unfortunately, no," Jasper said. He looked at his friend, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth fondly. "I didn't see any mysterious brown-haired, blue-eyed ladies you talked to yesterday at the ball. Was that before or after I went to talk to Lord Rockley and his group?"

"Just after," Ryan said firmly. "About ten minutes after."

Jasper shook his head. "I didn't see her, unfortunately. What was it that caught your interest?"

Ryan blinked. "What do you mean?" He felt affronted. Was it so unusual for him to like somebody? He swallowed, realising that it was.



Jasper grinned. “Just that there were a dozen beautiful young ladies you talked to yesterday – I saw them, and any one of them could be described as arresting or admirable – and yet this one, particularly, has you demanding of all of us who were there if we happened to notice her?”

Ryan looked away. He knew it was unusual. He had a habit of acting disinterest, even when something caught his attention, thinking it made him look jaded and sophisticated. Last night, he had seen someone with true confidence, though, and that had shaken him out of his cool, aloof act.

“Yes, I liked her,” he admitted.

Jasper laughed. “That’s a fellow! Well, I wish I had the delight of spotting her.” He gestured ahead. They had been walking down a crowded street and had arrived outside the club Jasper frequented. “Shall we enter? I reckon maybe Rockley and his crowd are here, and they could tell us who was there. If anybody might have seen your mysterious beauty, perhaps they did.”

Ryan swallowed. He was not, oddly, the sort of person who often attended gentlemen’s clubs. He pretended to be. He actually found he disliked the dark, smokey interiors where people crowded to talk about racing, boxing, and other things that didn’t really hold much appeal. But, since he was a duke and a member of the ton, it was expected, and so he did it, even against his judgement.

“Yes,” he said. “Mayhap they will.”

He went in through the big doors, Jasper nodding to the footman who stood at the entrance. His friend was clearly recognised as someone

who came often, and Ryan walked in beside him, feeling uneasy.

He looked around. It was dark in there, as he had expected, and the big leather seats at the tables looked just as stiff as he might have guessed. Two other people were in there, sitting at a table and playing a card game. Ryan noticed Jasper incline his head to them and guessed he knew at least one of the gentlemen.

“Exterfield,” he greeted one of the men warmly. “How are you this morning? Did you enjoy the ball?”

Exterfield – a pale man with pale brown hair – yawned. “Quite thoroughly,” he said. “So much so that I can barely wake up.”

Jasper laughed. “Grand. May we join you?”

Ryan tensed. He had wanted to spend the morning talking with Jasper – he hardly ever had a chance to see him nowadays. He and Jasper were both so busy, and the rare moments Jasper had alone, he spent with Adeline. Ryan looked sullenly at the other two gentlemen, but when they shrugged and shifted so that Jasper could sit down, he sat alongside.

“We were playing whist,” Exterfield said. He gestured at the table. “Want to play? I was winning, but I reckon we can start again.”

The other gentleman laughed. “Most happily.”

They all laughed, and Ryan leaned back, surprised that he was feeling relaxed. He usually hated this sort of company. He grinned to himself – he was so distracted, thinking about the lady from Almack's Assembly, that he barely had time to maintain his usual act of disgruntlement.

“So, Your Grace,” the other man greeted him. “We’ve not been introduced. I’m Alfred Hadley.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Ryan said. He surprised himself. It was so unlike him to be so friendly, to shake hands with strangers so informally. “I am Ryan Wellston.” He didn’t add “His Grace, Duke of Claypool,” because if the young man had addressed him as “Your Grace” already, he clearly knew. He glanced at Jasper, who was leaning back, a glass of something in one hand. He was surprised at how quickly Jasper had relaxed and accustomed himself to the place, the company, and the cards.

He looked around, feeling unsettled again. He needed to know who the young girl he’d talked to was, but he was starting to feel awkward about asking. He couldn’t very well just ask everyone until he found someone who remembered her. It would look silly. He looked at Jasper, who was studying his cards with intent. At least his friend wouldn’t be listening.

“Are you here for the Season?” Alfred asked him, making him blink with surprise. Usually, people didn’t approach him or talk to him so readily.

He nodded. “I am.” He looked down at his cards, realising it was his turn. He selected a card at random and heard someone swear under their breath. He was surprised when he noticed he’d actually chosen rather well.

“Having a good time?” Alfred asked him.

Ryan made a hesitant face. “I suppose it’s nice.” He hated the Season – he only participated because Marlford said he had to. He knew it was his duty to father the next duke, but it wasn’t something he ever thought about. He was enjoying this Season well enough, oddly, though.

Remembering how much he’d enjoyed last night’s ball brought him back to the topic that had been on his mind all day. “Were you at Almack’s Assembly yesterday evening?” he asked, watching Alfred’s face carefully, intent on his answer and on asking him the next question – about the nameless lady.

“I was,” Alfred said, inclining his head agreeably. “I danced a fair old bit – didn’t see you there. Did you attend too?”

“I did,” Ryan agreed. He felt a little upset – he had danced rather a lot. Well, five whole dances, to be precise. But he was sure that if Alfred had been there, he would have seen him at some point. He put his annoyance aside and drew a breath. “Did you notice a particular young lady? One in a white gown, with brown hair and blue eyes?”

He heard a chuckle from Jasper, but his friend was only commenting on the cards. He felt glad that Jasper hadn’t been listening to him. If he heard him ask about the mystery girl again, he would certainly chuckle.

Alfred shrugged. “Can’t say I did, old chap. Ah! Look. Randall! There you are! Come on and join us! We’re playing already – you can get a

drink there from the footman ... maybe you can answer this mystery question for us.”

Ryan turned to see who had arrived. A tall man was walking in, grey-haired with a strong face, quite appealing-looking in a cool, assured way. He was tall, slim, and had piercing dark eyes. Ryan guessed he must be at least twenty years his senior. He shifted on the bench as the man came to join them.

“Good morning, Alfred,” he greeted him. He nodded to Ryan. “Good morning. Let me sit here, so I can at least introduce myself.” He grinned at him in a friendly way. Alfred moved up so the man could settle beside him. “What question is this?” he added.

Ryan looked over at the man, wondering about him. He was interested to meet him, which in a morning full of surprises, was just another. He glanced at Alfred, wondering if he was going to make an introduction.

Alfred nodded. “Well, I’ll do the introductions first, Randall. The question involves a mysterious lady. Your Grace, I would like to introduce my friend. May I present the honourable Mr Randall Newford. He is the brother of Viscount Atfield.” He cleared his throat. “Randall, this is His Grace, the Duke of Clayford.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Ryan inclined his head, surprised when the older man shook his hand firmly, his smile lighting up.

“You must be the child of Leeson. Is that right?”

Ryan nodded. It sounded so strange to hear his father referred to by

name. He drew a breath.

“You were acquainted with him?”

“Acquainted! We frequented the same club!” The older man shook his head, a smile on his face as if he was looking into the former years when he and the duke had been friends. “I am so surprised to meet his son. His only son, am I right?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. He felt awkward. This was a friend of his father! He wanted to hear everything he had to say about the previous duke, but he had no idea how to ask him. “I am his only child.”

“I see.” Randall nodded. He tilted his head to one side, studying Ryan. “I was sorry to hear of his passing.”

Ryan nodded. “It was many years ago. But I still think of him, and I thank you.” He was surprised to notice that his voice ached with feelings. He had thought he was far from mourning for his father, but meeting this man reminded him of the man he had lost.

“Now,” Randall said, leaning back in his chair, “what was this mystery? I do love a good mystery.”

Ryan grinned. He was shy now, aware that Jasper and Exterfield were listening, too. He cleared his throat. “I won’t ask anyone else after this,” he said by way of introduction, “but I met a young lady the night before at Almack’s. I have been trying all day to learn her identity. Nobody so far remembers her from the ball. I have one question – were you there?”

“No,” Randall said, and Ryan felt rather upset.

“Well,” Randall said, one brow raised. “What is it, then? I might not have been there, but yet I might know this lady. Tell us of her – I am sure I am not the only one wanting to know by now.”

Ryan cleared his throat. “Well, all I know is what she looked like – that she is shorter than me by perhaps a hand’s length, that she had brown hair and blue eyes and was wearing a white silk dress.” He saw Alfred grin. “Yes, I know, half the ladies at Almack’s can be relied on to wear white. But those are the only facts I can use to identify her.” He looked hopefully at everyone at the table.

Randall shrugged. “I’m afraid I know no such lady. I can only encourage you to search well. If you were so taken with her, I feel sure there must be something special about her.”

Ryan smiled. He was pleased to have this assurance, especially from an older man he felt must know more than himself.

He gave him a thankful glance. “Thank you for your encouragement.” He cast a look around the table at the others, wanting to make it clear that they had been less than interested in assisting him.

Randall shrugged. He gestured to the footman, wanting a drink. “I know a few things, young man. One of them is that if anything tickles your fancy, then you should pay attention.”

Ryan smiled. He wanted to say that the young lady had done more than that – she had interested him considerably. But he was too shy.

“A glass of port wine?” the footman asked Randall, who shrugged.

“Bit early, eh?” he asked.

Ryan nodded. “I suppose so, sir.”

Randall smiled. “That’s a good fellow! Well, no, thank you. I’ll take a drink later.”

Ryan felt surprised and impressed by the older man. He wanted to hear more about him and especially to hear more about the previous duke, his own father. He rarely met people who had known him, and it was always wonderful to hear their stories of him. It made him seem closer to Ryan somehow. He took a breath, about to ask him a question, but Alfred was passing him his cards.

“I’ll sit out the next round,” he said. “I’ve played too much today.”

Ryan looked down at his cards, feeling pleased that Randall would stay. He passed them to Alfred, who was ready to deal the next round. Randall accepted a hand and started to play.

Ryan found his thoughts drifting from his father to the mysterious lady. He wondered where she was. He wondered, too, if the



interaction between them had made any impression on her. Maybe she had just enjoyed leaving him stranded in the ballroom and had forgotten about him.

He looked up as Randall stood, adjusting his jacket. "I must go," he said. "My apologies – I forgot about a silly meeting with my solicitor." He shook his head as if managing his money was tiresome. Ryan grinned at that. "I was so pleased to be able to talk with you," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Ryan said warmly.

He stood as Randall left, and so did the others. He found he wasn't too interested in playing, and neither were the others if the desultory way they put cards on the table was any indication. He was not surprised when Alfred stood up a few moments later.

"I should probably go too," he said. "I should settle something with my accountant. Some bill I can finally pay now."

"Grand."

Jasper smiled at Alfred and, as they stood when he left, Ryan glanced at him.

"Should we go?" he asked.

Jasper shrugged. "I reckon so," he said. "I feel the need to walk this morning – I suppose if I don't keep moving, I'll fall asleep."

Ryan had to smile. “Well, then. Let’s go outside. I wouldn’t mind walking down the road, either. There were some interesting shops on the way.” He didn’t really need anything, but it was always nice to look. One good thing about London was the possibility to obtain things – gloves, cravats, and that sort – without having to search far and wide. There were a few streets where there were so many shops one was almost certain to find whatever one sought.

He walked with Jasper out of the club.

It was a cool morning, and he was glad of his hat and coat. He walked along, listening to Jasper telling a story about his last trip to check something in his accounts. He wasn’t really paying attention to anything, thinking about what he might ask Randall next time he saw him.

He couldn’t help being delighted by the fact that he’d met someone who knew his father! He recalled his father’s portrait when he almost walked into somebody. A coach had stopped at the side of the street, and two people climbed out. He blinked as he looked at the girl he had walked into.

“You!” he said.

The mystery lady raised a brow. “It’s you! Well, that is a surprise.” She made a face, and he had to laugh.

“My Lady, you seem somewhat unsurprised.”

“Surprised? I certainly am. Perhaps one should bear in mind that surprises come in many sorts.”

He chuckled. “My Lady! You are refreshing. I have been here two weeks and have met nobody who says exactly what they think, so eloquently.”

“Thank you. I find it advantageous to say what I think. It makes things less complex.”

He nodded. His face was transformed with a smile. He couldn't keep from grinning. He glanced down the pavement to where Jasper was standing, a few feet away. He was talking to a fellow who was pointing at a shop, and Ryan was grateful that he hadn't noticed his preoccupation. There was a woman with the mysterious lady; he guessed her to be a chaperone. He inclined his head politely, and the woman curtsied.

“My Lady,” he said. “I must say your method of speaking your mind is to be emulated. I wish I could so easily tell you what was in my thoughts.”

“You may,” she said, a smile on her lips. “I am sure that it will not be so shocking.”

He laughed. “I assure you, My Lady. It is not shocking. I simply wish I knew you better.”

She raised a brow. “You have already learned one fact – that I speak my mind. I declare, you know me better by half again than you did a moment before.”

He was grinning. She had a truly wonderful way of speaking. She said so much, and at the same time, he ached to know actual fact. Who was she? Why was she here? What was it that made her keep her identity secret? He was determined to know more about her, and he found himself walking along with her, all three of them going towards where Jasper strolled to the shops the fellow he’d been talking with had shown him.

“My Lady,” he said. “I know that I know so much compared to a moment ago. But I still ache for one piece of information – I know not your name.”

She raised a brow. “If we meet for a third time, I shall tell you.”

Ryan let out a sigh. “Why can you not just tell me now?”

She tilted her head. “If you tell me your name, there is no harm in it for you. If I tell you my name, my reputation depends on trusting you. And I do not even know as much about you as you do about me.”

Ryan nodded. He felt stupid. He should have thought of that. He could hear what that meant for her. He cleared his throat, trying to think of something to say, something that might serve to make him seem like a responsible person. He could think of nothing to say, and by the time he had decided what he might reply, she had managed to step neatly around the crowd that thronged in front of them and eluded him.

“Dash it.”

He looked for her, but he couldn't spot her, and he thought that she must have taken advantage of his confused state and slipped into one of the streets running off the main road. He glanced around, but there were so many ladies in white bonnets that he couldn't spot her. He saw Jasper standing on the roadside and went across to him, feeling shy.

“I was talking to the girl from last night,” he said as he went to where he waited so patiently across the street from them. “She just happened to be here.” He looked at Jasper. “I asked her for her name this time.”

“Grand.” Jasper smiled. He could see genuine fondness in his friend's face, and he thought he approved. “Well, I'm so pleased that you had the chance to do that. And I hope you will take your card around soon.”

“I didn't *get* her name. She wouldn't tell it to me. She said she wouldn't because she has no idea of who I am as a person.”

Jasper nodded. “I suppose that makes sense,” he said fairly. “You have to admit you might do the same, should you be a young woman instead of a young man.”

Ryan tilted his head in agreement. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose.”

He tried to fight down the longing he felt – wanting to run back the way they had come and seek her out. He couldn't believe he had a

chance of finding out who she was, and he had managed it so badly! He wished he could find her so that finally he might find out her name.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He was in London, and there were not so many gentry and nobles, and so the chance of seeing her again must be great – he had to believe that.

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